THE SALTWATER TWIN AND OTHER MYTHICAL CREATURES

by

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The cure for anything is salt water—sweat, tears, or the sea.

Isak Dinesen
Saltwater

One of the things I loved about the ocean was being able to hold my mother in my arms. Like I was grown and my mother was a baby or a bride. I would badger her to put her book down on her towel and take a dip. Together we would walk past the little waves toward the horizon, our bodies growing buoyant and more buoyant still. My sisters Molly and Sam dove and surfaced, seal-like, now beside us, now in front, shouting watch me mom watch me. When my mother could lift her feet and float but I could still touch, she would circle her arms around my neck and hook her knees over my outstretched arm. I’d wrap my other arm around her back and grip her side. Menemsha Pond was still. Crabs skittered across the soft, red sand, minnows flicked around our ankles.

“You’re a baby,” I would say. “Be good. Go to sleep.”

Molly would pull on my mother’s limbs, trying to unpeel us. “I’m going to hold her on my hip with one arm like a mom who’s making dinner, like I’m cooking hotdogs and holding the baby, let me do it, let me have a turn. Mom, don’t stop pretending you’re a baby.” I’d slap at my sister then, spray us all with water.

“Stop it girls,” our mother would say. “Molly, let your sister finish her turn.”

First I, then Molly would plod heavily through the water, murmuring to our mother. Sam would stand on tiptoe and doggy paddle around us in circles and infinity signs. Our eyes stung, our lips grew slick and salty. Our mother smelled of coconut tanning oil and sun-warmed scalp. Then she’d grow cold and say that’s enough and go back to her book on the beach.

* * *
Years later, when I was trying to piece it all together, long after I’d lost faith in my parents and stopped believing in God, I tried to call back that feeling of wanting to be close to my mother’s body. It was a sweet memory. It should have felt sweet. But it didn’t. I could recall the memory but not the sweetness. Instead, it made me sick. It was strange how things got lost. Got lost, got called back. Like waves? A memory triggered feels like water shaken from an ear, so immediate and embodied, a rush and a relief, and then a trickle away to nothing.

*     *     *

My mother met my father at a party. It was the spring of my mother’s senior year in college. The cherry blossoms in D.C. were blooming. My mother was a history major prone to skipping class, cribbing notes from friends and scraping by on exams. Years later she’d tell me she wished she’d applied herself.

“I wasn’t nearly as smart as you,” she’d say. “But I was smart. I thought I might have been a lawyer. But there was no one to encourage me. Poppie didn’t think about those things. And I fell in love about once a week. If it hadn’t been your father, I would have married someone else. I probably should have. But then you wouldn’t be here. Or your sisters. Maybe I’d be a judge.”

“You couldn’t be a judge,” I said the first time I heard that story. I was six and confident I knew how things worked. “You always want to break the rules. You yelled at the library lady ‘cause she wouldn’t let us in to return the books.”

“It was five after five,” said my mother. “People are idiots. She’s lucky I didn’t drop them in the gutter.”
My mother’s name was Margaret. She wouldn’t let friends call her Meg or Maggie. Her brothers called her Mags, but they were the only ones, and she hated it. She called my father Charles, though to everyone else he was Charlie or Chuck old boy. When the two of them met, he was an intern at a nearby hospital. She was strikingly pretty, green-eyed and wasp-waisted, with a sleek chignon of dark hair. Black Irish, she said. Descended from the Moors who sailed to Ireland from Africa. She wore a white dress embroidered with violets, very demure, very butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-her-mouth. She was with a date, as usual. She always had a date and an assortment of suitors-in-waiting. That night it was a South American exchange student who was going to take her to Rive Gauche, the fanciest restaurant in town. My father took notice the instant my mother walked through the door, and after he’d watched her for a while, he left his own date—which was so like him, my mother would point out when she told the story, to leave the poor girl—and came to talk to my mother. She said if she’d known my father two more weeks she would have known she couldn’t have picked a worse man to marry. But he’d decided on her and she didn’t think about things.

“Sue me,” she’d say. “Sue me. I never thought about anything. I don’t know what was going on in my head, full of cotton I guess. I wasn’t serious like you.”

My father asked my mother if she was a nurse before he asked her name, even. His mother had been a nurse.

“There wasn’t much girls could do during the Depression,” my mother always said by way of explanation. “Plus, Mémé was never an intellect.” Anyway, Mémé hadn’t been a nurse since World War II. She took care of her children, her home and once her kids were grown, she embroidered altar cloths and vestments with Chi Rho and Ichthys
for St. Vincent’s. Regardless, my father had no intention of marrying a nurse. He wanted
the hospital to himself. My mother was beautiful and lively. He asked if he could call her,
and he did the next day.

My grandfather, Poppie, and my mother’s siblings came down for her graduation,
two brothers and a sister. My mother was the eldest. Their mother, my grandmother,
Nora, had died when my mother was eleven. My mother’s youngest brother Kevin had
been only five. Nora had been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s when she was pregnant with my
Aunt Eileen. She was sick for eight years and gave birth once more, to Kevin, before she
died.

“We were Catholic,” said my mother. “Nobody used birth control.”

After their mother’s death, my mother and her siblings were raised by a series of
housekeepers. Their father never remarried. At my mother’s graduation, he stood
between my mother and my Aunt Eileen. This is how I imagined it: Poppie wearing the
fedora that made him look like an old school detective or ad man. He’d been in the FBI
when he and Nora were first married, back during the war. Then he’d started a law
practice in their town and gone on to become a judge. When I was little it always made
me think of Solomon holding a sword over a fat baby.

The way I pictured my mother’s college graduation, father and children stood on
the green quad surrounded by men with cameras and girls in pearls. Poppie held his
daughters around the shoulders and pulled them close.

“The end of an era,” he said. “The Queen of Sheba is on to bigger and brighter
things.”
My mother’s brothers shook my father’s hand. Jack had a crew cut with a JFK swoop, seventeen-year-old Kevin’s hair touched his collar. A hippy, my father probably thought. My parents were both the eldest of four, though both my father’s parents were alive.

To hear my mother tell it, my father’s mother Mémé was horrified when my father came home that summer with a fiancée from Connecticut. Mémé consoled herself that at least my mother was Catholic, but it didn’t make up for her being a Yankee. When my mother arrived in Georgia, Mémé demanded to see the dress she’d brought for the engagement party, a yellow silk sheath with princess seams, and nodded it would do. Then she sent my mother and father behind the barn to pick apples for pie. My father waited till my mother pulled herself into the crotch of a tree, then told her that the ground below was full of snakes. She started sobbing and refused to come down. That’s when she should have known he was cruel, she always said. That and the fact that he’d convinced her to let him buy an Austin Healey instead of an engagement ring.

“But Dad brought you tea and toast,” I protested whenever my mother brought up that story. “Auntie Nan said he thought you hung the dang moon.”

My mother would snort, “Yeah, that’s a load. Nan said that? What a load.”

“Your Grandpa George adored me though,” she always said. “He was lonely. Mémé wasn’t very bright. Grandpa George and I sat in those rockers and talked and talked.” She would imitate Grandpa George’s Gone with the Wind drawl. “He told everyone who would listen I was purty as a picture and no biggah than a minute.”
My parents were married in September, in my mother’s childhood home in Connecticut, six months after they’d met. My father drank too much the night before and was hung over during Mass.

“All he did was crack jokes with my brothers,” my mother said. “They were in love with his convertible. And there I was with no engagement ring. My grandmother gave me a beautiful peignoir. But she made me clean my room first. I guess I was a slob, like you. I always had my head in the clouds.”

The last photo in my parents’ wedding album was of Poppie and my aunts and uncles, her mother’s siblings, all teary-eyed, waving goodbye.

“We were always an emotional family,” my mother said.

The album was bone-colored, embossed with gold.

My parents’ honeymoon was three days on Martha’s Vineyard. Some friends of friends had a home there. It was off-season and the island was empty. They walked on the beach in fisherman’s sweaters and clam diggers. My mother tied a scarf around her hair that the wind had whipped into a tangled mess. It must have felt exotic and grownup to vacation together in a place neither one had ever been. An island, six miles off the coast. They fought one night because my father teased my mother for being afraid of the dark. She sobbed with the lights on and he went downstairs to drink on the couch.

A week after the wedding they moved into an apartment on an Air Force base in Alabama. The war needed doctors and my father had heard volunteers could pick their branch of service. He’d never been on a plane before, but he liked the idea. Rumor had it they were sending flight surgeons to Thailand. My mother begged the inspector general’s wife to stop her husband from sending my father overseas. He couldn’t go without her
she said, they were newlyweds. She used to tell my sisters and me that story and then sing an old Civil War song about a girl who tied back her hair, put on a uniform and followed her love into battle.

My father built a hutch for the black and white TV that my mother’s brothers had given them as a wedding gift. Sunday mornings they went to Mass. Saturday nights they went to the Officers’ Club. My father didn’t dance. He drank with his buddies while my mother sipped cherry Cokes and danced with her favorite bachelors: Alan Reynolds, who would die zigzagging a Wild Weasel to attract anti-aircraft fire so other pilots could drop their bombs; Tim Marshall, who would make it out of Vietnam alive and crash a plane into an Arizona mountain.

My mother took a job as the first white teacher at a segregated high school. She told my father it bothered her that the other teachers from her school stepped off the curb when she passed them shopping downtown. My father said they were protecting her because they knew she’d start in talking to them and that wouldn’t be good.

When I got older, I’d asked questions. “Every week the black teachers stepped off the sidewalk because you needed protection? You were in danger? You?”

“That’s how it was,” my mother said. “No one wanted me to get hurt. Everyone knew who I was.” She said she’d asked the superintendent to place her in the all-black school because she knew she wouldn’t have been able to stand all the bigots anywhere else. All conversation would stop when she walked into the teacher’s lounge. She’d stay until she couldn’t stand the silence. She’d never seen black people when she was growing up. None of them lived nearby.

“What about your housekeepers?” I asked. “What about Ruby? And Katherine?”
“Well, of course,” my mother said. “Ruby lived in our attic. I wasn’t talking about housekeepers.”

“But she must have had family.”

Oh, my mother didn’t know about that. Maybe in Hartford.

The story my mother told most often was the one about the time she took some of her students to the DQ—“it wasn’t a real Dairy Queen, it was like a Dairy Queen”—and some good old boys spat in their food. How her students had told her they didn’t need to go to the DQ, but she insisted, and they finally went along. Sometimes she told a version in which the students didn’t protest.

“It’s funny, they were smart girls, some of them really very bright, but none of them thought about what might happen.” That the waitress would refuse to come to the table and my mother would have to make several trips to the counter to get the food. That those boys would call her an n-lover. She wondered what happened to those girls after graduation. Some of them were really very bright.

It was a difficult start to their marriage. Alabama was hot. There were no parties, no Rive Gauche. My mother thought with nostalgia of the year she’d studied in Paris, how happy she’d been, without a care in the world! There’d been some very nice boys, American servicemen stationed in Orly, and they’d escorted her all over the city. She traveled through Europe with Poppie at the end of the semester. Hot chocolate, pastries, gondolas and postcards. Just the two of them; her brothers and sister were back home. She was Poppie’s favorite. The Queen of Sheba, he called her. Unlike her sister Eileen, she was exempt from chores.
“I’m a Mary, not a Martha,” she was prone to say. “Not everyone loves housework.

“Mom, hardly anyone loves housework,” I would respond.

“Well, some people don’t mind it. Your father is obsessive like Mémé. Let me tell you, he was perfect for the military. He should have been a monk. As for Mémé, she’d just as soon let the housekeeper play with the kids while she did the ironing. I got on the floor and played with you. She thought I was crazy.”

“But what about Eileen?”

“I don’t know, Eleanor. That’s just how it was. You think about things so much. You don’t understand, I just didn’t question it. I hate dishes and dusting. Poppie would yell at Eileen if the pot roast was burnt or a shirt wasn’t ironed. She said it wasn’t fair, but Poppie said he didn’t expect that of me. I don’t actually remember that. But Eileen says it’s true. She says that’s what he said.” Years later, Eileen would cut ties with the family, after two marriages and two PhD’s.

My mother lost a pregnancy a year before I was born. The afternoon it happened, my father, who was the flight surgeon on call, was summoned to search for a downed plane. My mother sobbed; she begged my father to stay, to call another doctor to go with the search party, to tell them he wouldn’t leave his wife alone. My father dropped her off at the ER and got in a helicopter. He drove the dead pilot to Montgomery—he knew his name, they’d gone to the same church—and picked my mother up the next morning.

She cried for a week.

“It’s hormones,” my father said. “It’ll pass. You’ve just got to be patient.”
My grandmother Nora’s wake was held in the living room. For three days she lay in a coffin right under the bedroom where her daughters slept.

“Open coffin,” my mother would tell me. “I was only eleven, but it didn’t phase me a bit. Eileen, on the other hand—come on, her mother’s lying dead in a coffin, and she’s six! You don’t think that’s traumatic?”

For years, I had a recurring dream of Nora, with femme fatale lips, lying in a coffin in the maid’s room at the top of Poppie’s house. The only light came from the little window crisscrossed with branches that clicked against the glass. The coffin was dark and gleamed like Poppie’s dining room table.

A few months after Nora died, my mother was chosen as May Queen. She wore a white dress with a grosgrain sash, and she crowned the Virgin Mary. The nuns picked her because her mother was dead.

“Besides that, they were mean to me.”

Some time after Nora’s death, my mother’s aunts took her aside one by one and told her about her period. But Nora had told her already when she was only eight. Even though that was early for those days, my mother said. Nora had explained everything.

After the miscarriage, my mother watched Days of Our Lives and cried on my parents’ couch with stripes the color of fall leaves. She went back to teaching.

When I was born the following year, my mother nursed me on the couch, even though Mémé said breastfeeding was barbaric, in front of the black-and-white TV, watching Bobby Kennedy’s funeral train crawl south from New York to D.C. People held up their hands when the train went past. My mother sat on the couch with her infant
daughter and cried. She’d never cried when her mother died. She always said her sister Eileen thought that made her a terrible person, but she’d never felt like crying.

If my mother hadn’t cried as a kid, I wondered when she’d started. Growing up, it felt like we were all swimming in her tears. She used to tell us a story of when she’d started teaching in Selma. One of her students—she remembered his name—Cleophas King—had stayed after one day and said his mama would whup him for asking, but he wanted to know if white folks cry. My mother laughed and told him he should ask her husband, he’d say she cried all the time.

I asked my mother once what made her fall in love with my father. She couldn’t think of a single thing.

“I didn’t even think he was good-looking. My friends did. But I looked at our wedding album the other day. And I can see it now, looking back.”

The next day she thought of something. She called me to tell me what it was. They were in the car on their honeymoon and my father went to change the radio station and she said, no, she loved that song, it was Simon and Garfunkel. The song went, “Hello darkness my old friend…”

“The Sound of Silence?”

“Yeah, I think that’s what it was. And he didn’t change it, even though he said it was sad. So that was a nice thing. I’ve always thought that.”
When my parents brought Molly home from the hospital when I was fifteen months old, I climbed into my stroller and refused to walk again for weeks. We had moved back to D.C. after my father finished his two years in the Air Force. My mother’s brother Stevey had joined the Marines, Kevin swore he’d bolt to Canada if his number came up. My father worked long hours at the hospital, sleeping in the on-call room or coming home to fall into bed after Molly and I were asleep. I remember my father from those years in fragments. An Easter Sunday, an aluminum swing set he assembled one afternoon in the backyard, him shoveling snow on the stairs with ice in his moustache.

He bought a fish tank. It burbled away atop a small cabinet in the hallway. Angelfish, swordtails and blue tetras flicked through fake seaweed and passed through a castle of plastic molded to look like stone. Tiny snails slid their way across the glass in painstaking trajectories. The fish had gem-colored bodies and fins like feathers. My father replenished the ones Molly or I spotted floating at the surface. My earliest memory was standing stocking-footed on the hardwood hallway floor looking up into the tank. A bulb attached to the lid cast light down through the bubbles. I watched the fish eat and breathe and swim. Glittery skin over toothpick bones. What did I look like to them, my face, bigger probably, than the moon? The whole world to the fish was their glass tank of water. They looked at me and moved their mouths in delicate o’s. Their eyes, black and secretive, revealed nothing. In Genesis everything was water. And God breathed on the waters and separated earth from sky. And God watched mankind like the fish in the tank. There were worlds and worlds smaller and smaller and so many animals.
Molly and I shared a bedroom with pink walls and a window that looked out to the muddy backyard. When it was nice we drew on the sidewalk with bits of colored chalk. When it rained we rode tricycles down the hall and around our bedroom until my mother yelled. In the afternoons my mother twisted her hair into a shower cap and slipped into a tub with Alpha Keri bath beads that turned the water electric blue and stained the pages of her books. She told me that once, hearing me scream, she rushed into a smoke-filled kitchen and found me standing on the linoleum watching the toaster go up in flames. But that isn’t one of the things I remember. I remember my uncle Kevin and his friend Joey smoking on the back stoop while Molly and I mixed dirt and water in egg cartons. My mother sat with us and smoked, too, holding the cigarette away from her body and tapping ashes off with her thumb. Sometimes Kevin and Joey brought grease-stained paper bags of burgers and fries with little packets of ketchup. We always said prayers at bedtime, but sometimes my mother didn’t make us kneel down. Afterward, she read fairytales and picture books and poems from a book called *A Child’s Garden of Verses*. She did the voices of goblins and princes and pointed to the pictures and waited to turn the page. I leaned into the crook of my mother’s arm and scoured the pages as she read. I ran my finger over the lines of letters. Some had hooks, some tails. O was a circle, T a cross, C a sideways moon. The letters told stories of animals that talked and witches and ordinary children who drank milk and wore underpants and painted and went to school. The lines that made words were everywhere: on the back of cereal boxes, in the hymnals at church, scrawled on the round and round slide Joey took us down at the playground. My mother gave me paper and pencil and I made lines and crosses and squiggles.
When I was four, my grandmother Mémé came to stay so my parents could go to my Uncle Stevey’s wedding. My Uncle Kevin had eloped at the end of that summer with a girl whose parents disowned her for marrying him. Now it was Stevey’s turn. The day before Mémé arrived, the house smelled like furniture polish. My mother vacuumed under the sofa and baked brownies and periodically sobbed.

“This house is a disaster. She already thinks I don’t know how to cook and clean. Of course that’s my job, to be your father’s step and fetch it,” she muttered to the laundry on the dining room table. “We might get snow next weekend. I hope your father told her about that. There’s no reason you couldn’t come with us. There’s plenty of room. Molly I’m begging you not to wet the bed while Mémé is here. What’s she going to think?” My mother sank into a chair and made a sound like an animal. She put her head in her hands and when she lifted it, tears dripped off her chin. “I still have to pick up your father’s shirts from the cleaners and I have no idea what I’m going to wear. I don’t fit into anything anymore. I’m just a fat housewife. It’s pretty rich, isn’t it?”

Molly and I stood on the rungs of our mother’s chair to pat her hair. “It’s okay, Mom,” we murmured, looking at each other over the top of her head. “You don’t have to cry.”

“You don’t understand,” my mother wailed. “No one does. Not your father. I can’t do this. I can’t, I can’t.”

I’d heard my father say what this was called. This mood where my mother cried and shook, where she wouldn’t listen to anyone and no one could reach her where she was.
“You’re hysterical,” he’d said. “You need to wash your face and calm down. You’re working yourself up over nothing.”

“She’s never thought I was good enough for her precious boy. Are all southern mothers like that or is it just yours?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Margaret. You just sound foolish, now.”

“I guess I’m just not going to go to the beauty parlor.”

The first two nights Mémé stayed in a hotel and took a taxi over. “Now, Margaret, I’m here to work,” she said. I am at your disposal. I could dust that living room or whatever you need. And don’t fret about the taxi. I had a very nice man drive me today. Very well-spoken. I don’t mind a bit. Of course Charles can drive me back when he gets home. What time will that be?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” my mother said.

“Well, we’re used to that, aren’t we? Doctors’ wives? We’ll just have a nice hot meal waiting for him, then. Girls, what should we make your father for dinner? Some Southern fried chicken? Biscuits and gravy? He probably hasn’t had those in a while.”

When my parents left for the wedding, Mémé moved into their room.

“My goodness, there certainly is a lot packed into this closet, isn’t there? And a television right in the bedroom, isn’t that something?” Mémé’s clothes were packed into a suitcase with tissue between them. She set a rosary and a prayer book with gold edges on the nightstand. She looked under the bed and clucked her tongue. She took out a bag with twists of rainbow-colored threads and packets of bright silver needles. She sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. Molly and I clambered up. Mémé tightened handkerchiefs into a wooden hoop and showed us how to wet the thread in our mouths
and guide it through the eye of the needle, how to roll the other end into a knot. “Like so,” she said and showed us how to push the needle up from underneath and back down through the fabric. Prick and pull. Backstitch, running stitch. She examined our first attempts. “You want your stitches small and even. Take your time, now, and do it right.” Molly’s thread bunched and she went to ride her tricycle up and down the hall. I worked all afternoon and then all weekend. I stitched tiny and then tinier. Prick and pull. I plucked out mistakes and stitched again, aiming for a line as even as Mémé’s. I told Mémé I wanted to stitch honeysuckles. The chain link fence behind our house was full of them in summer. My father had shown me how to pinch the end of the blossom, pull out the threadlike pistil and suck out the nectar inside. “That’s the ticket,” he’d said. Mémé said that too, when my stitches came out even. “That’s the ticket.”

“Can you show me how to make a honeysuckle?” I asked.

“I cannot. That’s advanced embroidery. You are a beginner.”


My father said those are neat when Molly and I presented him with the embroidered handkerchiefs. He rubbed our heads too hard, and I ducked out from under his hands.

When Mémé left for the airport, Margaret had a headache. She stayed in bed all day with the shades pulled down. I was in charge. I read books to Molly. I took out bread and bologna and made sandwiches. My father came home early in his heavy coat. The house was dark. We were perched on the foot of our parents’ bed watching the black-and-white TV with the sound off. My mother lay on her stomach under the covers, a pillow
pulled over her head. My father tossed a paper bag on the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. When the shower came on, my mother sat up and asked me for a glass of water. “No, a Coke,” she amended. “There’s some on the basement steps.” In the kitchen, I pulled the tab on the can, dropped it into the garbage and brought the can to my mother. She tore open the bag and unscrewed the lid of a bottle of pills that click clicked inside the amber plastic. She put a pill on her tongue like communion, took a sip of Coke and lay her head back on the pillow. I turned the volume knob on the TV until it was just audible.

We were watching Sesame Street. A man said: “And now, the octopus,” and the creature billowed across the black and white TV, unfurling yards of tentacle, slow and terrible, pressing its suckers to the screen. Rows of suckers, the mouth like a great, blinking eye. Arms exploded from the stellate center, thick as a circus strong man’s, tapering into fern-like tendrils, covered end to end in suckers white and shiny as the scar from our mother’s smallpox shot.

At Sunday school, I had learned the Christmas story, how the Angel of the Lord came upon the shepherds abiding in their fields and they were sore afraid. People in the Bible fell on their faces in awe of the terrible glory of the Lord. I felt that with the octopus. I wanted to hide my face, but something in me insisted that I look. Mémé had taught us a prayer.


“No,” said Molly.
I reached back and felt my mother’s foot under the covers. I started to bounce gently on the foot of the bed. The octopus swam in the television. “Four corners to my bed—” I looked at my sister. “What’s the rest?”

“I don’t remember,” said Molly.

“Four angels round my head.” I bounced more vigorously, and Molly joined me. A bounce for every other word. “One to watch and one to pray, and two to bear my soul away.”

“Away!” shouted Molly.

“Girls!” my mother shouted. “I’m begging you. Turn it off. Go play in your room.”

* * *

That spring the babysitter sat my mother down on the couch and told her I could read.

“She’s fooling you,” my mother said. “She’s memorized her books. She’ll tell you if you skip something.”

“No,” said the babysitter, who was Kevin’s friend Joey. “Come here, kiddo.” He picked me up and sat in the armchair with me on his lap. He opened a big book in front of me. “Watch this.” His finger pointed to the words on the page. “What does this say?”

I looked where Joey’s finger was pointing. I liked this game. It was fun. I didn’t know what the words meant, but I could say what the letters said. “The skull is supported on the summit of the vertebral column,” I read. Joey helped me with vertebral. “It is composed of a series of flattened or irregular bones which, with one exception (the mandible), are immovably jointed together.”
“See?” said Joey. “She can read.”

Margaret started to cry. She sat me on my father’s lap when he came home. I read again.


“That’s neat,” my father said. “Where’d you learn to do that?”

I shrugged.

“Without the hippocampus,” my father said. “A person couldn’t read a map. They could never find their way home. At the end of the hippocampus is the amygdala, which is responsible for fear. When they destroy the amygdala in a rat, it will walk right under a cat’s nose. What do you think about that?” I didn’t know what my father was talking about. In the drawings the body looked like it was full of rivers and trees and flowers.

* * *

That summer Margaret packed the car with beach towels and plastic shovels. Molly and I crawled into the back seat, put our pillows against the doors and slept. We drove on a highway, then into a town with churches and stores, a movie theater and a roller rink. This was Poppie’s town. Poppie, my grandfather, lived alone. He’d never remarried after my grandmother Nora died, just had a series of housekeepers. Poppie wore horn-rimmed glasses, Bermuda shorts and Penguin polo shirts with skinny collars. He coughed when he laughed.
My mother turned into the driveway and turned off the engine. A woman with honey colored hair pulled back in a kerchief stood on the stone steps leading to the shiny front door. It was hunter green. I had read it on a crayon.

“Do you remember your Aunt Julia?” my mother asked, opening her door to get out of the car. “Isn’t she beautiful? Not a stitch of makeup on her.” Molly scampered out and grabbed my mother’s legs. “Honey, let go. It’s too hot.” My mother called up to Julia, “Don’t you look glamorous.”

“Oh, I’m a mess,” Julia said.

“Girls, do you remember Stevey’s fiancée? She’s your Aunt Julia now.” My mother hugged her sister-in-law. “Are you all moved in next door?”

“Well, the boxes are,” said Julia. “We haven’t slept over there yet. Girls, how about some lemonade and cookies? Poppie and Uncle Stevey will be home for supper. Margaret, I made that German potato salad you like.”

Inside the house, my mother showed me the bottom shelf on the built-in bookcase in the living room. “These were my books,” she said. “Well, some I shared with my sister Eileen. You can read any of these.” I opened a book with a dark green cover. The pages were brown on the edges and yellowish inside. “Hans Christian Andersen,” I read. “Fairy Tales Told for Children. Nora Ryan 6 Market Street.” The page was marked in thick pencil and scribbled with orange crayon.

“Oh,” said my mother. “That was your grandmother’s. My mother’s.”

“You don’t have a mother.”

“I did when I was little. When I was your age. Then she got sick.”

“She died?”
“Yes, she died.”

“She lived here?”

“When she was a grownup, yes. When she was little she lived in Detroit.”

I knew this about grownups, that they were little once. It was strange to think of my mother being little, of me being inside my mother before I was born, my mother inside my grandmother before that, like rosy cheeked babushka dolls.

“Can I read this one?”

“Knock yourself out.” My mother stood and brushed off her skirt. “I’m going upstairs to take a nap before dinner. You can read any of the books in here. *The Bobbsey Twins. The Boxcar Children.* They were a little too goody two shoes for me.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon on the living room floor in front of the bookcase. I read “The Princess and the Pea,” “The Emperor’s New Clothes” and the scariest one of the bunch, “The Little Mermaid,” which was set in the deepest sea, deeper it said, than any anchor cable could reach. The book said it would take many church towers on top of each other to reach from the ocean floor to the surface. There was a witch with a knife who cut out a mermaid’s tongue and a prince and daughters of the air who had to wait three hundred years to enter the kingdom of God.

The living room had a fireplace and mantle cluttered with black-and-white photos of Margaret and her siblings. A grand piano that was out of tune. An old couch and an easy chair. A table next to it stacked with books and an oyster shell full of ashes. The rug was a worn, nondescript gray. The house smelled of Ivory soap and smoke. A grandfather clock ticked in the hall and a metal fan blew dust and pollen across the hallway floor.
Poppie and Uncle Stevey came home and we had dinner in the dining room. This was how it was before the rest of the cousins came along. When it was just Molly and I, the two oldest grandchildren. This was the summer before the first of the rest of the babies were born. Then the house would be full of grandkids all summer. We ate hamburgers and corn and some chocolate ice cream for dessert. Then Molly and I had to go to bed, as we always had to in summer, when it was still light outside. We climbed the stairs, put on our nightgowns and brushed our teeth.

Upstairs were four bedrooms. Two faced the street, connected by a dusty screen porch. The other two were smaller, tucked into the back of the second floor. Each had a chest of drawers and a bed with a wool blanket. Poppie slept in one of the front rooms and when she stayed there, my mother took the other. Each had a pair of twin beds.

“One of you will be in here,” my mother told us. “And one will be with me. You can take turns.”

I lay in bed in Poppie’s room. There was a sink next to my bed, and the light switches were black buttons you pushed into the wall. I could hear birds twittering outside the windows and the grownups talking downstairs, yelling at the table. My mother and Uncle Stevey always yelled in this house. And Poppie yelled, “Boy oh boy, that’s rich. Shysters, the lot of them.” The curtains moved in the breeze. I thought when it was dark the curtains would look like ghosts. But it wasn’t dark. A kid shouted up the street to another. Big kids.

Years later, I would try to recall what it felt like to have the body of a child, the bones of a smaller creature. The sensation of being lifted. A hand coming down on the back of my neck. Sitting on the lap of an older kid or grownup, straddling their thigh.
bones, toes grazing the ground, leaning back into the solidity of a larger, heavier body.

Wrenching out of a grownup’s grip to run across sand or grass or pavement.

We stayed in Poppie’s house for a week, Molly and I trading nights in his bedroom. Molly stayed more often with my mother because she cried when she had to sleep in Poppie’s room. By the end of the week, I knew it by heart: Black telephone with a dial on the cherry-wood nightstand between the beds and a picture of Jesus on the wall by the dresser. In the picture, Jesus was as pretty as a girl. Holding out his hands with the dark red gouges from the nails. He wore a white cloak and a red gown trimmed with gold and in the center of his chest was a bleeding heart ringed with thorns. At night Poppie lay in bed and smoked, his cigarette a beating heart in the dark. The nights I stayed in Poppie’s room, I had bad dreams. Eggs went down the drain in the sink. The tree outside had fingernails that tapped on the windowpane, that slid beneath the sill and crept crablike across the floor and over the bedclothes. The sacred heart of Jesus grew wings and flew around the room, a trapped bird, sticky with blood that fell in warm drops on the bedspreads.

*     *     *

At the end of the week my mother, Molly and I drove the car into the belly of a boat. The horn bellowed. I smelled salt, diesel and tar. The ferry went over the water and I couldn’t tell if it was moving slow or fast. Seagulls cut the sky, wheeled and shrieked, dropped like stones and rose again on invisible columns of air. The island came into view. Men tossed ropes as thick as my arm from the boat to other men who caught them on the dock and pulled them all in. Back in the car, we drove to a house with a wraparound porch and a yard of scratchy grass and rocks. There was a trailer in the
backyard, on a bluff overlooking the sea. A woman came out of the trailer and gave my mother a set of keys. Molly and I brought our dolls and books inside. My mother put on a record and made spaghetti.

We spent a week alone in the house. I loved the hermit crabs that scrabbled in our plastic buckets, the seaweed, the prehistoric horseshoe crabs. On Sunday the priest said “Body of Christ” with a Boston accent, salt dried in ribbons on their skin. We saw hippies in shaggy cutoffs and tennis ladies in pleated white skirts. Sometimes we swam on the ocean beach and raced down the hot sand of the dunes past sharp, sun-bleached grass and tangled thickets of wild roses with blooms the impossible pink of Barbie lipstick. Sometimes we swam at Menemsha Pond where the beach was festooned with dried seaweed and spotted like birds’ eggs with blotches of black sand. The sand, of course, was everywhere. It peppered our scalps, worked its way into sheets and sandwiches, dusted the floors of the house.

My mother seemed happy at the beach. She asked us whether we’d brushed our teeth and if we could imagine what that little schoolhouse up the road was like a hundred years ago and whether we wanted a peach or some boysenberry yogurt for a snack. We went to the library and the fudge shop. My mother bought cookies at the bakery and put sandwiches and lemonade in a cooler. Molly and I made dribble castles with turrets and moats. We lay on their rafts and watched the minnows in Menemsha pond. We raced through the shallow water, laughing at how it pulled us down like trying to run in a bad dream.

We brought horseshoe crabs up from the beach and lay them on their backs on a flat rock in the yard. They looked like cellos or violins rather than horseshoes. The ridges
on their brown backs were the curlicued f-holes on an instrument and their long tails/noses—I could never remember which end was the front—were bows. They came in all sizes, from giant granddaddies to tiny, translucent babies. They were gentle and ancient, their claws too insubstantial to pinch. Molly and I carried them up from the beach to a low flat rock in the yard. The rock, too, felt ancient, the grass alive with the gossip of wind and bugs under the cornflower vault of sky. We upturned the crabs and left them on the rock. The crabs waved their claws in protest, furiously, then slower as they baked in the sun. We left them on the rock by the dozen and went inside to play with our dolls or draw or read or eat the things our mother made for us.
The Snake House

In September we moved into a new house with two stories next door to a Thai diplomat and his family. Molly was the same age as the daughter, the son a year older than me. When we first moved in, our neighbors invited Molly and me over for lunch. Molly cried when the diplomat’s wife set before each of us a bowl of rice and vegetables topped with a glistening fried egg. I had to take Molly home for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Next to that family lived a mother and a toddler we called Baby Annie. I never saw a father. Molly and our neighbor, Samorn, were very bad to Baby Annie. She followed them like a puppy. Just on the block. None of them were allowed to cross the street. They ordered her to eat dog doo or jabbed her with sticks and said they were giving her a shot. Once they made her hold still and let them switch her with willow branches. But she kept coming back. I didn’t play with them. It made me too upset. I was mean, too, though. Molly and I fought in the basement.

In November my Aunt Eileen came to stay because we were having a baby. Aunt Eileen set her suitcase down in the hall and knelt to hug me. Her raincoat smelled like cold air and cigarettes. Her eyes were brilliant green, and she had cropped her dark hair into a bushy pixie. Later, we stood in the rainy hospital parking lot and waved up at my mother who leaned on her elbow in a window because children weren’t allowed on the maternity floor. Then we were taken to the doctor for a check up and finger prick. These always made me wail. I was embarrassed by my behavior, but there was something awful about being asked to hold out a finger for the nurse to stab with the needle, then watch the blood pool and glisten jewel-like on my fingertip until it was siphoned off and wiped
away. I howled and continued to sniff on the way home in the car. Eileen laughed and caught my eye in the rearview mirror and said I was quite an actress. I silently vowed I would never love my aunt. My mother came home with our new sister and nursed her in a rocking chair in the baby’s bedroom. Our sister was named Sam, short for Samantha.

My mother often dressed Molly and me in matching outfits. We were so cute and so blonde and Mémé made us twin dresses and playsuits in contrasting colors, one in green gingham and one in yellow, one in blue rosebuds and one in pink. That Christmas, my mother decided to make our holiday outfits herself. She dug out the sewing machine Mémé had given her as a wedding gift—which my mother claimed was no subtle hint—and took over the dining room table for a week, bloodying her fingers with pinpricks and bitterly cursing _Jesus Mary and Joseph_ that the _EASY_ label on the pattern was a big, fat lie. In the nick of time, she finished making Molly, me and herself matching navy velvet skirts, which we wore with tartan sashes and white blouses to see _The Nutcracker_ ballet. Ordinarily I hated being dressed in the same outfit as Molly. It felt different, though, when our mother was as well. I thought we looked like presents. We stood on a red carpet with my father in his dark suit in a perfumed thicket of fur coats and gowns that shimmered like water. Wine glasses winked, chandeliers blazed. I felt fancy and beautiful. I took a dime store comb from my quilted, lime green pocketbook with white fringe and pulled it through my hair.

My mother snatched the comb from my hand. “What are you doing?” she hissed. “We don’t do that. It’s trashy.”

I was pretty sure trashy had something to do with too-tight jeans and above-ground pools. Or the wife of the handyman on Mémé and Papa’s farm who was three
hundred pounds if she was an ounce according to my Aunt Nan and probably had to be weighed on a meat scale like the women my father took care of at the hospital. Molly laughed because she could see the dancers’ penises in their tights. There was a battle between mice and soldiers and a doll that came to life and a godfather who was magic. It reminded me of dreams I had when I was running a fever.

When spring came my mother took us all to the zoo. Molly and I had seen *Rikki Tikki Tavi* at a friends’ birthday party and we wanted to see the cobras. When the four of us walked together, Margaret pushed the stroller and instructed me to hold onto its handle with one hand and Molly with the other. Sam slouched like a fat little emperor. She wriggled and pointed and said ba, ma, ah. We stood in front of manmade rocks and faux savannas and rain forests watching chimpanzees and elephants and giraffes. We wanted to see the cobras. My mother bought us popcorn and balloons, both red because Molly had to have the same color as Eleanor. We wanted to see the cobras. “Please stop saying that word,” Margaret said. She called the snake house the “you know what” house, as if the word itself were a flute that would rouse and uncoil the thing she feared. She brought us to the entrance.

“I know I’m a bad mother, but I can’t go in there with those things. Hold hands, girls. I’ll meet you at the exit.”

I took Molly’s hand. Our balloons bobbed above us as I shepherded Molly through the humid dark, past the glass cases aglow with their lethal inhabitants. They lay coiled and sleeping: Burmese python, cottonmouth, cobra. I read the signs that said their names and where they came from: Southeastern Asia, Southeastern U.S., rainforests and plains of India. We left handprints on the thick glass, watched the snakes sleep with their
eyes open in the heavy air. I wanted the cobra to sway like Nag and Nagaina when they opened their hoods. I picked at the string around my wrist. My mother had insisted we tie the balloons on. “I don’t want tears,” she said. The knot came loose. I wove the string through my fingers and felt it grow damp in my grip.

Rikki Tikki Tavi patrolled the house at night. The house was still, the narrator said, but Rikki Tikki thought he could just hear the faintest scratch in the world, as faint as the sound of a wasp walking on a windowpane: Nag, slipping through the bathroom drain to kill the family. The scariest part of all was when Nagaina swayed in front of the little boy on the veranda. “If you move,” she rasped, “I will strike. If you do not move, I will strike.”

The snakes in the windows lay motionless. I thought of my mother waiting for us on a bench outside. Maybe she was worrying about kidnappers. Maybe she was saying Hail Marys. Sam was kicking her feet and crying to get out of the stroller. Some people thought cobras hypnotized their prey, but the sign at the zoo said that was a myth. It was possible, however, for the prey to be frozen in fear.

*If you move, I will strike.*

In the movie, a mother bird pretends her wing is broken to draw the snake away from her babies.

*If you do not move, I will strike.*

“Poppie’s lonely,” my mother said. “He’s your family. I changed your dirty diapers. I rinsed them out in the toilet. But it’s too much trouble for you to do one thing, one tiny little thing for me.”
My mother had Sam on her lap when Molly and I emerged, blinking, into the afternoon sun.

“Don’t tell me about it,” she said. “I don’t want to know.” She shivered. “Ugh. It gives me the chills.” We made our way slowly back to the parking lot. When I opened the car door, I felt something slip from my hand. I watched the balloon, a clown nose, a cherry on a sundae, float lazily toward the clouds. It caught a breeze and arced back toward the animals we’d left behind.

“Mom,” Molly said, “Eleanor untied her balloon.”

My mother shielded her eyes from the sun and looked up. “Oh, Eleanor, what did I say?”

I was quiet. It was sad to watch the balloon grow smaller and smaller still. My eyes felt hot. I wouldn’t cry.

Turning out of the parking lot, my mother caught my eye in the rearview mirror. “You’re not upset?” she said.

“No.”

“You can share my balloon,” said Molly. “You can touch the string.”

“That’s very nice, Molly,” said my mother.

“I don’t want to.”

My mother slid the car into traffic. “You’re a tough little nut, aren’t you?”

Molly parroted my mother. “You’re a tough little nut.”

* * *
That summer, after a week at Poppie’s house, we went back to the Victorian on the bluff. My Aunt Eileen, the last one unmarried, had gotten engaged to a professor of mathematics, so the whole family was coming for a visit. Stevey’s wife Julia had had a baby boy and Kevin’s wife Suzy had a girl. So there were three toddlers staggering around the summer I was five. I learned to hoist them onto the changing table to change their diapers and how to distract them so I could take away things they weren’t supposed to put in their mouths.

“I didn’t use these for you,” said my mother when she showed Molly and I how to open the Pampers and peel the paper off the sticky tabs on the sides. “I had to rinse your diapers in the toilet. It was no picnic, believe me.” Molly begged for Pampers for all her baby dolls. “It’s a waste of money,” my mother said. But she gave us two pairs each.

The mothers opened the kitchen cabinets and let the toddlers pull out saucepans, skillets and colanders and make a racket on the kitchen floor. Tiny ants crawled across the linoleum—sugar ants, my mother called them. The toddlers chased them across the floor, shrieking and laughing. They squashed them under their fat fingertips, littering the floor with tiny, crumpled bodies. We were all crammed into the house, except Eileen and her fiancé, who stayed at an inn nearby. They showed up at the end of breakfast on the first day. Eileen ran fingers through her hair till it stood up like a brush. Her fiancé Mike looked relaxed and curious. He was taller than anyone else. Six foot four, I’d heard him say.

“He’s like the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk.” Eileen said and opened her green eyes wide. They had flecks in them like dots of pollen or the powder on moth’s wings.
“Fee fi fo fum,” Mike rumbled, chewing the words like he was crunching bones and Molly went behind their mother’s legs. I liked Mike.

“Can you touch the ceiling?” I asked him.

He extended his arm overhead. “Not quite,” he said. “But I bet you could.”

I looked past him at my mother and Eileen. They’d crossed into the dining room where Poppie was still at the table behind the newspaper.

“Is that coffeecake?” asked Eileen.

“Daddy, you should go put on your bathing suit,” my mother said. She turned to Eileen. “Are you going to change?”

“I’d like a little piece of that.”

I looked at Mike and rolled her eyes. He was playing a game. “I can’t touch the ceiling. I’m too little.”

“Are you not coming to the beach?” my mother was asking.

“Yes, we’re coming. I didn’t know we were in rush. Daddy’s still reading the paper.”

“Wanna bet?” Mike said. He bent and put his hands around my waist. “Ready?” Then I was upside down, feet planted on the ceiling. “See?” Mike said. “Touching the ceiling. Straighten your legs. Take a little walk.” He turned me toward the voices in the dining room.

I shuffled my feet on the ceiling and laughed. “Mom! Mom!”

“Eileen, what’s he doing?” said my mother. “Daddy, tell him to stop.”

“This country’s going to hell in a handbasket,” said Poppie. He lowered the paper.

“What are you doing, Eleanor old gal?”
“Who turned the house upside down?” I said.

“Daddy, do you think that’s safe?” said my mother.

“Oh for crying out loud,” said Eileen. She came back into the living room and kissed Mike on the lips. “You’re very strapping,” she said. “I’m going to change into my bathing suit. Apparently we’re on a timetable.”

The blood was pulsing in my head. “Down,” I said, and the world went right side up again.

*     *     *

The grownups talked and played with the toddlers then put the toddlers in their playpen and talked some more.

“Tell us about your wedding,” Julia said to Eileen.

“You should elope,” said Suzy. “Spend the money on a trip. Weddings are so crazy. Well, these two know. No offense.”

They talked about weddings. They talked about Nixon and Watergate. There were trips to the package store for beer and vermouth. There were steaks on the grill and boxes of pie picked up from the fish market. My father talked about how the salt water was good for us and how that was a nice piece of fish and asked who wanted to drive with him to the dump. He made a swing and hung it from a tree in the front yard.

Poppie asked what grade Molly and I would be in come September and if we still liked school and if we thought our father made a blueberry pie that wasn’t half bad. Poppie read thick, hardcover books, and asked if we knew that it made God happy when little girls were obedient. He said good girl, that’s a good girl. He sat on the couch with
us sometimes and read us stories. He told my mother he’d take some toast with 
mushrooms. He crossed his brown legs and tapped ash into an oyster shell.

Molly and I went to sleep in sleeping bags in our parents’ room. The sleeping 
bags were bubble gum pink, quilted cotton printed with fat blonde angels and script that 
said “Kiss me goodnight.” Molly lay on a chaise lounge just long enough to fit her. I took 
the window seat. I liked to press my fingers into the screen and bring them away, my 
fingerprints obliterated with a diminutive grid. Sometimes it was nearly sunset when we 
lay down. I would listen to my sister’s breathing and watch the light fade, thrilled by the 
hauntedness of twilight, the slide into darkness. I liked to focus on the grassy yard which 
was, in the sunshine, pale green, and the great oak that bowed over it—gray bark, 
mustard colored lichen—and ask myself, what color is it now? And moments later— 
now? And then when darkness took away all color, there were sounds—wind in the grass, 
a gurgle deep in the belly of the house. A distant car outside, someone awake going 
somewhere I would never see.

*   *   *

It rained for three days after everyone left. The light was grey and green outside 
and in the house yellow like old paper. My mother and I read. Molly badgered me to play 
baby doll tea party on the screen porch. But once on a rainy morning we got in the car 
and drove to a pizza shack by the water. We got slices and cans of Coke and parked 
facing the shore. The waves reared like horses and battered the sand, pulling the earth 
back into the sea. The car rocked in the wind.

Molly was nervous. “What if we get washed away?”
“Maybe we’d have an adventure,” my mother said. “Maybe we’d make it to Spain.”

“I don’t want to go to Spain,” said Molly, starting to sniff.

“Oh, Molly, you don’t have to go to Spain,” said my mother. “I bet Eleanor would like to go.”

“Yes,” I said.

In my memory, the wind and water grew stronger until waves crashed over the car like a saltwater carwash. The storm picked us up in its teeth like an enormous grey dog and shook us till we had to laugh. We were under the great waterfall at the end of the world. We ate our pizza and went home.

When the clouds blew away in the afternoon, my mother took us to the beach. We splashed in the water. I felt we were intruders, our splashing and voices clumsy and raucous. It was eerily silent and overcast, one of those afternoons when the air is so heavy it seems to hold secrets.
Summer after summer, my mother asked us, “Who’s going to sleep with Poppie and who’s going to sleep with me?”

“He smokes in the middle of the night,” I’d tell her. “We can't breathe.”

“He snores,” Molly would say. “It’s impossible to sleep.”

Sometimes my mother got angry, "I guess family doesn't mean what it used to anymore,” she’d snap. “When I was young, we loved to be together.” Sometimes she wept. “I’m exhausted,” she’d sob. “I’m exhausted, and you can’t do one simple thing for me.” She’d tell us how lonely Poppie was and that we should think of his feelings for once. “Poppie loves you girls.”

So Molly and I took turns in his room with the black telephone and Jesus on the wall and the cherry of Poppie’s cigarette in the dark: One night her, one night me. If I were braver and less selfish I would have gone every time. She was younger. I shouldn’t have made her go ever.

What I remember: Lying in bed, waiting for the grownups to come up. Not my father. I know he was there sometimes—he must have been—but not that I remember. I fell asleep to the rise and fall of voices, squeak and slam of the screen door. Then I was asleep but not asleep. That between where you can watch yourself sleep and sometimes you can move and sometimes you can’t. Creak of the stairs, Poppie’s toothbrush buzzing down the hall. There was a sink in his room, but he didn’t brush his teeth there. My mother said it was old fashioned; people used to have sinks in their rooms in the olden
days. Poppie came in and shut the door. Sat on the bed where I lay. This is how it went: his hands, hard as roots, were on my back, rubbing circles through my cotton nightgown.

“Wake up, little girl, wake up.” He was over me, one knee on the bed, trousers undone in his old man undershirt. “In your mouth. You know how I showed you.” He pushed himself into my mouth, my face the mask of a girl who didn’t exist, holes for eyes and nose, wet with snot and tears, jaw broken like a stepped on toy.

Closet door open, rack of silk ties and leather belts, iron door stop shaped like a Boston terrier, sacred heart of Jesus on the wall, branches outside, smell of dust, oak desk in the corner, twin beds with lox colored bedspreads.

I fetched a magic acorn from a forest carpeted in moss. I disappeared for weeks into shadow lands, I swam in the sea with whales. I was Nancy Drew and I slipped down a passageway.

I didn’t smell Poppie’s skin that smelled like asshole and smoke.

Poppie growled and breathed like a goblin. Sputtered and went out. There was egg in my hair. He told me to wash my face in the sink beside the bed. He lit a cigarette. I curled shrimp-like in one bed, he sprawled across the other exhaling smoke into the dark.

I didn’t know what this was. I knew where babies came from. We had books and I understood the mechanics. But that was grownups, married people. This was beyond me. My mother lay in the next room, reading one of her thick books, twisting a lock of her hair. She had a bald spot behind her right ear. She couldn’t stop herself. She looped and tugged out strand after strand; there were jettisoned hairs in all her books.

In the morning we ate cornflakes and milk in Poppie’s green kitchen. It was old fashioned, like everything else. The coffee gurgled in a silver percolator. Molly scooped
sugar into her cereal until her spoon could stand upright. Poppie’s housekeeper Katharine puttered around the kitchen, opening cupboards and frying eggs. One side of her face sagged like melting wax. I’m sure she could tell I was afraid of her. I feel guilty still for that.

My Uncle Stevey and his family started sharing the house we rented on the Vineyard. Aunt Julia was my favorite aunt. She was beautiful and no-nonsense and she made us pancakes for breakfast instead of cereal. Jack and Molly were best friends. My cousin Meredith, who was two years younger than Jack, was a crybaby. Everyday, Julia and my mother chatted on towels on the beach while we exhausted ourselves fighting the waves, staying in till they protested that our lips were blue.

The summer after third grade is when I heard about Abby and turned her into the Saltwater Twin. I was listening to my mother and Julia talk. We had eaten sandy tuna sandwiches and drunk sandy lemonade and we weren’t allowed to go back in the water for half an hour. My sisters and cousins hunched nearby over mounds of sand drizzling sandy broth through their fingertips into delicate stalagmites. I lay on my stomach on a beach towel and dug my feet into the sand.

I’d developed the habit of listening to grownups’ conversations. It was like reading books I didn’t understand. Sometimes it was boring. But I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want to miss anything important. Anything I needed to know. They talked about James Taylor and Carly Simon and whether we should pick up some Portuguese sweet bread for dinner. Julia told my mother how she’d had to clean up the bathroom after my Uncle Kevin smashed through the sliding glass door of my grandfather’s shower when he was three sheets to the wind and it was blood and glass everywhere. He’s lucky he didn’t
slice open his jugular. And then she told my mother about Abby, their next-door neighbor’s daughter, who’d drowned in the Atlantic. The whole family there on the beach. You take your eyes off them for one second.

I knew how it felt to be dragged under, shaken like a ragdoll, lungs like party balloons about to burst until I managed to surface, spluttering and choking, through the foam. It made me feel strong to look the ocean in its fearsome blue eye and come out breathing. I knew the ocean might drown me, but not because it was malevolent. That’s just the way it was. Not that there was no fear; fear tumbled with me in the salt-clouded blue-green. It held me, one part at a time, laced around a wrist or thigh, bubbled across my sealed lips. But there was something else—a steady let go, let go—a calm, a beyond that nothing could reach. For a split second, I felt eternal, omnipotent. Then I’d swallow water and gasp back into time above the surface.

I’d never met Abby. If she looked anything like her siblings, she was a sandy-haired, freckle faced kid. Her family had moved in next-door to my cousins—her twin brother, their youngest, was my age—but she was already gone by then. Abby drowned in the Atlantic when we were three, leaving her brother, leaving all of us behind.

Our fathers and grandfather were coming that night. That afternoon, we were coming home from the fish market when the deejay said: “Coming up here on the hour we have Dr. Hook with ‘Daddy’s Little Girl.’” In the first verse, a kid told her dad she heard an angel saying “one more year.” Then the slide guitar gave way to violins and the singer solemnly quavered through the tale of how his little girl died from a fever twelve months later. It really made an impression on Molly, who came home and went right to
work on her own dead girl song. She taught Jack and Sam and Meredith. I refused to be in it.

“You’re singing about a dead girl,” I said. “It’s gross.”

But Molly had always liked a tragedy. At school that spring she’d written a story called “Rachel’s Doll” about an orphan who wasted away when her adoptive parents wouldn’t allow her to bring her beloved doll to her new home. Molly shared my love of orphans. I’d graduated from Pippi Longstocking to Sara Crewe and Anne of Green Gables. Even Nancy Drew had a dead mother. But Molly liked her heroines dead. She was an emotionally fragile child. There were afternoons, when I arrived at her first grade classroom to walk her home from school, that I had to coax her from under a table. When we played *Little Women*, I always cast Molly as Beth, the invalid who dies of scarlet fever, while I was bluestocking Jo.

After dinner that night, Molly called for attention. She, Sam, Jack and Meredith lined up by height on top of the heavy coffee table in the living room while the grownups crowded onto the sofa and carried-in dining room chairs. I tried to get out of watching, but my mother insisted I stay and put down my book. I perched on the arm of the sofa. It irked me that everyone would think I was pouting because I wasn’t in the show.

“It’s a stupid song,” I’d told Molly. “If you want to embarrass yourselves, be my guest.”

Molly cleared her throat and gave a Mona Lisa smile. She clasped her hands behind her back and swiveled her body from side to side. “I wrote this song. It’s called ‘No More Crackerjacks.’ Beat. ‘Cause My Little Girl Is Dead.”

The grownups laughed.
My mother leaned forward. “She really did write it all by herself.”

“It was pretty much on the radio,” I said, “Basically the same song. Only less dumb.”

“Shut up,” said Molly.

“Well, artists get inspired by things,” said my mother, “Molly, don’t say shut up.”

Shuffling and whispers on the coffee table. Then my sister and cousins sang at the top of their lungs,

No more crackerjacks, no lollipops, no sugar smacks
‘Cause my little girl is dead.
She’s gone away forever,
She’ll never never never come back come back.
Ding dong, ding dong, my little girl is dead.
Ding dong, ding dong, my little girl is dead.
She’s gone away forever,
She’ll never never never come back come back.

The adults applauded.

My mother beamed. “That was terrific, Molls.”

“That was something else,” said my father.

“Hear, hear,” said my uncle Stevey.

And then they went to wash dishes and eat pie and smoke cigars on the porch.

I turned Abby into the Saltwater Twin on the ferry on our way back to the mainland. I liked to lean over the railing and watch the hull carve the bottle-green plane below us into frothy white furrows that connected the dot to dot of where we’d been to where we were going. I’d press myself into the space of that moment—sun and spray on my skin, the snap of my windbreaker, the deep rumble of the ferry in my legs. No one else could hear what I hear or see what I saw. I was apart; I was my own. I thought about Abby on her own in the ocean. Her drowning set her apart from all the rest of us alive on
the boat, and on the island, and all over the world. Maybe she was watching our ferry like
the mermaid sisters in the Hans Christian Andersen story, who poked their heads up
through the waves and spied on ships. The mermaids sang through storms to sailors
whose ships were going down. They told them not to be afraid; they sang of the beauty of
their kingdom under the sea. But every sailor who reached their undersea gardens arrived
there lifeless. The sisters grieved for the unlucky sailors, but couldn’t cry; the story says
that because mermaids don’t have tears, they suffer that much more. I liked that. When
my mother cried it made me want to punch her.

I pictured Abby below the waves where the water was gentle. I imagined she
floated like a bright October leaf, unhurried, lazily seesawing in the current till at last she
came to rest on the ocean floor. Her hair grew into delicate ropes of seaweed; her skin
turned opalescent like the inside of a shell. She wore a necklace of coral, swam seal-like
through shimmering clouds of fish and slept in an underwater cave with a nightlight of
luminescent plankton. In my imagination she grew mythic: The Saltwater Twin. Tommy,
the brother she’d left behind, was ordinary and alive, shooting baskets in his driveway,
eating pizza, drinking Coke. Abby belongs to the sea, I thought. She knows things no one
else knows.

Leaning over the ferry railing, I imagined Abby’s smooth head emerging from our
foamy wake. Wake: to rouse or become roused from sleep, a watch kept over a body
before burial, the track of waves left by a ship or other object moving through water. The
roiling water behind us that marked the place where we’d been. A wake: where Abby’s
family had sat with her and said goodbye; where men wore suits and cried and ladies set
casseroles and cakes on kitchen counters. A wake, awake: to be conscious, to have your
wits about you. I hated waking up. In the morning, dreams still clutched like dark weeds; I wanted to sink back into sleep and stay. A wake, awake. A word could mean one thing and another. A thing could be one thing and another. In the ocean, my mother grew light enough for me to carry. I could pick her up like a baby or a bride, a magical thing the water did. I endowed the Saltwater Twin with that magic. She was all-powerful, more powerful, anyway, than I or any of the adults I knew. And she was gone from the world, for good, while I was stuck where I was.

Everyone acted like things were normal. They talked about rain and carpool; they chopped onions and poured milk. But I didn’t feel normal. I felt like an anomaly, some kind of monster or feral child accidentally dressed in a Snoopy t-shirt and corduroys. Inside I felt dark, I felt deep. I could drag a sailor to his death. Outside was green lawns and fresh paint. Outside was living rooms kids weren’t allowed in, with petit point pillows and crystal dishes of candy made to look like pebbles.

In Sunday school we’d learned about transubstantiation, in which bread and wine really turned into the body and blood of Christ. When the altar bell rang, I looked for some tear in the air, some juddering of magic, listened for the whisper of the Holy Ghost. I held the host in my mouth at my first communion and wondered what it would feel like to chew on sinew and flesh, for my mouth to fill with the blood of Christ. I imagined the taste of jungle gym, penny thickening my saliva like milk. The communion wafers turned to paste in my mouth while I knelt and puzzled over the way something could seem like one thing and all the time be something else. I looked for secret passageways, prayed for signs.
Summer after summer my mother drove the station wagon into the belly of the ferry en route to the island and my father did the same on the way home. We clanged upstairs to the deck, and I looked for the Saltwater Twin. Shouts of “‘Bout a coin!” drifted up from below. They were there every summer—boys treading water in the murky green harbor, calling for coins from the passengers waiting onboard for the ferry to depart. “‘Bout a coin!” They fell silver and flickering into the water, and the boys disappeared after them. I imagined kicking down, eyes stinging with salt, catching nickels, dimes, silver dollars as they tumbled sunlit into the dark water. One by one, the boys surfaced, slick-haired and streaming, and called to us again.

Then the ferry whistle blew, and the boat lumbered away from the wharf. The wind picked up. I watched the gulls bank and plummet, cocky and shrill over the open water. Summer after summer, I pressed against the rail, eyes on the waves, watching intently for signs of life.
King Tut was nine when he became king and only nineteen when he died. In 1922 a British archaeologist found a set of steps that descended to the sealed doorway of Tutankhamun’s tomb. By candlelight he caught his first glimpse of what for hundreds of years had lain undisturbed inside: A bed in the form of a cow, an alabaster chalice, the king’s wishing cup, a resplendent throne carved with winged cobras.

In 1977 banners inside and out of the Smithsonian displayed the majestic King Tut mask: the gleaming gold face framed in alternating blue and gold stripes, the Cleopatra eyes and black bird eyebrows. Molly, Sam, my mother and I were waiting in a long, snaking line that looped through the humid halls of the museum. My father wasn’t with us. Instead, my mother had brought along Mrs. McClure, our friends’ grandmother who was visiting from Scotland. Cotton candy hair and a light blue suit with little brown threads. My parents had a museum membership, which meant we got discounts and usually shorter lines. This was still a very long line. I stood on one foot and then the other. We’d dipped under the ropes until we got in trouble. Then my mother passed us fold out brochures, glossy and slick that showed what we were about to see. Artifact, from the Latin arte factum, made with skill. A thing that tells a story about another time and place. It proves that something was true. I’d seen a documentary called *In Search of Noah’s Ark* that said they’d found some wood from the ark on Mount Ararat. The narrator, in a brown suit and giant glasses, said, “This may be the most incredible film you will ever see, but the facts that will be presented are true.” King Tut’s artifacts were numbered and photographed. Gold Burial Mask. The jackal headed god Annubis,
protector of graves. Stoppered stone jars containing Tut’s stomach, intestines, lungs and liver. I thought about them in the jars. I thought maybe I’d be King Tut for Halloween instead of Darth Vader. It would be cool to be a kid who was a king. There was a queen, too. His half sister. They married their fathers and brothers and uncles in those days. She was only twelve. She had two daughters with Tut. They were stillborn and found in his tomb.

When we finally arrived at the front of the line, the lady taking tickets looked us over. “The family pass is for immediate family, ma’am.”

“Oh, this is our grandmother,” my mother responded with a smile. “She’s visiting us from Scotland.”

That was a mistake, and I wondered why my mother made such a mistake.

“Mom,” I said, “She’s not our grandmother.”

The ticket taker raised her eyebrows. My mother hooked me behind her with her arm. I stumbled on the shiny floor. “Our pass is for a family of five,” she said to the ticket taker. “I don’t see the problem.”

The ticket taker called another museum lady over to confer. They looked at us while they talked.

My mother turned and lowered her face to mine. Her cheeks were flushed. “Not another word.”

I pointed to the bin beside the desk that contained headphones that guided you on a tour of the tomb. They cost three dollars. “I want headphones,” I said.

_As you enter the exhibit, it’s not hard to imagine that fateful day late in November 1922 when Howard Carter together with his patron the Earl of Carnavon and the rest of_
their intrepid team drilled into the seal of the royal necropolis, the city of the dead. What a sight met their eyes! Artifact upon artifact, each more astonishing than the next.

Later, I figured it out. I felt triumphant. “You lied to the ticket lady,” I said.

“That’s not our grandmother.”

My mother brushed it off. “I didn’t lie. I said she was a grandmother. She just thought I meant ours. You misheard.”

“I didn’t,” I said.

“You’re such a little stickler. Mrs. McClure would never have gotten to see King Tut. She was horribly embarrassed. I was mortified. Thank god the woman let us in. You’re lucky I managed to convince her. My mother would say, if someone calls and I’m not home, you can just say my mother can’t come to the phone. There’s no reason to tell them I’m not there. I said a grandmother. She just assumed I meant ours. You get it from your father. He’s a stick in the mud. I was a free spirit. I went to class in pajamas. My father always taught us to think for ourselves.”

Anytime I broke a rule I was wracked with guilt. Molly and Sam regularly snuck Ding Dongs and cartoons at our neighbor’s house and had forayed under the viaduct with said neighbor to play by the railroad tracks, which were off-limits because of both trains and strangers in raincoats. Flouting the rules risked a host of negative outcomes, from cavities to kidnapping by a sketchy guy in a van. I felt a keen envy, not just of Molly and Sam’s adventures but that they didn’t feel guilty about them.

My family had a set of snapshots from Sears Portrait Studio of me and Molly in flowered dresses Mémé had made. She made us nightgowns, rompers, jumpers in gingham and Easter egg pastels. Things that called to mind Little House on the Prairie—
bonnets, even, once. The garments arrived wrapped in tissue, folded in cardboard boxes, like the ones from the dry cleaners that held my father’s shirts. There was always a note in my grandmother’s spidery writing, pinned to the fabric: *I hope you like it. Work hard in school and be good. Love, Mémé.*

In the Portrait Studio photos, I had a Dijon-colored grosgrain ribbon in my hair to match the flowers on my dress; Molly’s ribbon was pink. They were looped into floppy bows on our heads, the ends rolled and crinkled. As soon as I was old enough to use the iron, I flattened my hair ribbons in clouds of steam. I fell in love with spray starch. I practiced tying picture perfect bows the way my grandmother had taught me. I tried to teach my mother; she said she couldn’t get the hang of it. Every time I looked at those portraits, it galled me that she hadn’t ironed our ribbons. I knew that made me a goody-two-shoes. I knew not even teachers and mothers liked a goody-two-shoes. But I couldn’t help it. I matched my socks to my outfits. I tore the pages with mess-ups out of my coloring books. I was obsessed with fairness. I liked grammar and spelling, things that could be counted and quantified and nailed down, predictable and safe.

*Tut’s organs were found in a chest guarded by four goddesses of gold. Each stood fifty-four inches high.*

The ancient Egyptians took out the organs and rinsed the body cavity with crushed myrrh and cassia and also palm wine. No jar for the heart. It stayed inside.

Curses were inscribed on the walls of some tombs to keep away those who would desecrate the resting place of a body: *An end shall be made for him... I shall seize his neck like a bird... I shall cast the fear of myself into him.* The Earl of Carnavon, who
sponsored the Tutankhamun expedition, died of blood poisoning from a mosquito bite.

Rumors circulated about a mummy’s curse.

Tut as a painted wood figure: the sun god. Dark eyes, full lips, an elongated skull.

Tutankhamen’s entire family had oddly shaped skulls due to inbreeding.

A game with wooden pieces in a box like a dominoes box.

A gold jaguar head.

Walking sticks, the king's underpants, and a copper trumpet.

A vulture and cobra on the forehead of Tut.

A boat to carry him into the afterlife.

Jars depicting scenes of animals in combat. Filled with unguents: a grease or balm. From the Latin, smear, anoint.

Statues of the slinky goddess Selket, who is associated with the scorpion. Her name means “she who tightens the throat” or “she who causes the throat to breathe.”

I imagined King Tut’s things boxed in crates, in the holds of ships and planes. Going all around the world. I felt a responsibility, in the presence of these ancient things that I was seeing once and would never see again, to pay attention and remember. King Tut’s tomb lay in The Valley of the Kings. When they buried him, they used a broom to brush away the footprints so they would leave no human trace.
Sunday nights, we watched *National Geographic* and *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*, shows that taught us how brutal the world was. I never knew whom to root for—the antelope running for its life or the lion—a kitty, after all, with roly-poly cubs, that needed to be fed. It was awful, the way things were. But there was no sense in being a baby about it. And there was no sense in rooting for both. You could endorse both lions and antelopes in general, but you couldn’t champion a particular lion and the antelope he wanted for dinner. A lion wasn’t made to eat leaves and berries. It had to eat things with hooves and beating hearts. It had to crush windpipes, break necks, stun and gut and gnaw unrepentantly on the viscera of its victims, no matter how much the sight clutched at the hearts of children watching in suburban TV rooms. The lion had the right to survive.

What use had the lion for a conscience?

Animals demonstrated useful practices: surveillance, camouflage, stillness. I thought it might be possible, if I really applied myself, to crack the code of their secret languages that talked about pursuit, flight, where to get food, where it was safe to sleep. People in books had done it—Dr. Doolittle, Merlin, Pippi. I crouched on sidewalks and chirped to vagabond cats. I squinted at twilit telephone wires to make out which bird was warbling which song. I rested my head on the barreled rib cage of my Uncle Kevin’s enormous, semi-feral dog whenever it took a break from terrorizing the neighborhood. I listened to the seagulls that wheeled and shrieked above the ferry when we crossed the Vineyard Sound. I left handprints on the thick glass of the gorilla habitat at the zoo. I
thought, *I’m sorry*, as hard as I could. Every animal said the same thing to me, the same word in clicks and shrieks and snuffling breath: *escape.*

My mother drove on our road trips to the Vineyard; my father would fly to meet us on the island. The highway shimmered like charcoal. Sealed in the air-conditioned station wagon, we slid by green and white signs, picked salty M&Ms out of a Ziploc of trail mix. Every few hours, we pulled off for gas, a pee and a Coke. I watched people at rest stops—eating, drinking, using the bathroom, taking care of the animal things they needed to do. The world was full of animals on two legs and four. They slithered on their bellies, went on wings in the sky. Sometimes I’d dawdle, shift out of my mother’s view for an instant behind some large-bottomed lady in Bermuda shorts, or a man with a camera or milkshake and wait for my mother to realize I was missing. Perhaps from my vantage point I could see her. Panic flitted across her face when she couldn’t see me in the crowd. She’d call my name, then, in a voice laced with fear, and I resented her, even more if people turned to look. My escape was small, surreptitious, unreal. It was easy to slip away, but I couldn’t stay gone. I had to get back in the car and back on the road with my mother and sisters, all of us swigging Cokes from icy, sweating cans.

Ten minutes or so from Poppie’s house, my mother would take a pink lipstick out of her purse, rub a little on her cheeks with her fingers, then smack some on her lips. Molly and I brushed our hair, tied our sneakers and put on Bonnie Bell lipgloss. Our tires crunched acorns in Poppie’s driveway, my stomach flip-flopped, my mother shut off the engine. Meredith and Jake hobbled barefoot through the rocky front yard to greet us. My Aunt Julia held us by our shoulders and smiled her beauty queen smile. Poppie walked
carefully down the stone steps that led from his wide front stoop to the driveway to hug
and kiss us all.

The summer I was ten and Molly nine, she screamed on her way up the stairs,
crashed up two steps, wrenched off her left shoe and sock and hurled them at the front

“Molly, what is it?” my mother asked, irritated. Then more gently, “Honey, what?”

“I don't know,” Molly wailed. “Something bit me.”

“Stung!” Poppie shouted. “Never mind that.” He chuckled. Three or four bees
floated out from the dark place below the step where Molly stood.

“There’s a beehive under the stairs,” I said.

“They don’t appreciate you walking on their roof, little girl,” Poppie said.

“This kills,” Molly wailed. “It’s not funny.”

"You don't have to tell me," Poppie yelled, "Those things smart." He lost his
balance and grabbed the railing, laughing.

“Daddy, don't laugh,” my mother said, laughing herself. “Come on, Molly. We'll
get some baking soda. You'll be all right. Stand up.”

“Oh boy,” Poppie bellowed.

“Daddy, honestly,” my mother said, “I don't know what you think is so funny.”

Poppie yelled the words one by one, “Neither. Do. I.” He gave me a toothy yellow
smile, then turned away. The trees buzzed and rustled.
After the car was unpacked, I crossed the worn living room carpet to the French doors that led to my grandfather’s colonnaded front porch. Poppie and my mother sat in his dining room, the polished table a dark lake between them. The air was close and hot.

On the way to Poppie’s house, we always stopped for lunch at the Dutch Pantry; there was a poem about a bird on their placemats that won you a free meal if you were twelve or under and you learned it by heart.

*The Distelfink’s a cheerful bird  
As golden as the sun—*

When I was seven, I’d traced the yellow bird on the placemat with my fingertip and repeated the lines in my head. Molly hadn’t memorized the poem, and it was a sore spot between us. We only got one free lunch instead of two. After I turned twelve that would be it. My mother had even taken a placemat home for Molly to learn the poem, but she wouldn’t.

*Good luck and happiness he'll bring  
As he has always done.*

“Do that poem for Poppie” my mother said.

Hand on the doorknob, I paused. “What poem?”

My mother smiled. “Come on. The one from the menu.”

I inspected a hangnail. “I can't remember it.”

“Yes, you do,” my mother protested. “That’s baloney. The waitress at the Dutch Pantry told us no one had ever memorized the poem before, Daddy. We got her lunch for free. On the house. She said that’s a bright little girl you have there.”

“And how,” Poppie yelled.
“She remembers,” shouted my mother, “She's just being a pill.” She lowered her voice so only I could hear her. “You might at least spend a little time with your grandfather,” she said. “There’s lemonade here. Where’s your sister? Probably already in front of the tube next door.”

“What's that, now?” Poppie said.

“See you later,” I shouted.

“Okay, little girl.” He coughed, a sound like choking on his own breath. His cigarette was a bee in the house, an orange bee swirled in sour smoke. He stung us, set things on fire. My mother asked him to please be careful—the sheets were all burned, the couches, tablecloths—but Poppie was old and not careful.

On hot days we’d pile on the couch in Uncle Stevey’s den and watch movies on TV. *Creature from the Black Lagoon, Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea, Moby Dick.* I was mesmerized when Ahab scaled the whale’s titanic flank, which bristled with harpoons, and plunged a spear again and again into its side bellowing, “From hell’s heart I stab at thee. For hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee.” Ahab was not very peaceable, even if he was a Quaker. Just before everyone but Ishmael is sucked to a watery grave, Moby Dick breaches with the dead Ahab crucified to his side, then plunges back into the depths. The image haunted me—the two of them bound irrevocably together, each compelled to destroy the other in order to survive. I was pulling for Moby. Ahab had picked the fight. I painted whaling ships in art class. That spring, I’d given my parents a painting: Giant flukes rising from bloody water dwarfed a distant three-masted ship, and little men rowed little boats between. They hung it above my father’s dresser.
Every summer, my mother puttered around her childhood home, poking into boxes in the attic, taking old books off the shelf. That year I found her dismantling my grandfather’s desk. One of the drawers lay on the floor in front of her, leaving a hole like a mouth. She rifled through papers like Nancy Drew searching for clues.

“My brothers are taking everything out of this house,” she said. “There’s nothing left. I don't have any pictures of my mother. She was Homecoming Queen in college, you know.” She held out a yellowing scrap of newsprint. “Look at this clipping. People said she was the most beautiful woman they’d ever seen.”

Downstairs, the screen door slammed.

“Mom!” Sam yelled. She thumped up the stairs. “Mom.”

“Don’t you think she was very beautiful?” my mother asked.

Sam appeared in the doorway. “Mommy, I need some money. We’re going to Ron’s for candy.” She tucked the hem of her t-shirt through the neck hole and pulled it through, exposing a swathe of midriff.

My mother surveyed the wreckage around her. “Go with your sister,” she told me.

“And bring me a Milky Way.”

An hour later I walked up the bee steps with my mother’s candy bar into Poppie’s house. If someone were watching from the sidewalk they’d see the bees fly up behind me when I opened the hunter green door with the brass latch. They’d see the rectangle of dark that I slipped into. Inside, an ancient and formidable-looking pedestal fan blew dust across the floor. Upstairs, my mother lay in her old twin bed in the quiet heat, the dingy spread clutched under her chin. I lay the Milky Way beside her on the pillow and left her sleeping in her father’s house.
Back home, my mother often took us to the National Gallery of Art. There was a painting in their collection called *The Peaceable Kingdom* by Edward Hicks. Hicks was a Quaker (like Ahab), and he was inspired by the Bible verse of the lion lying down with the lamb. The painting’s in that early Americana style with the muted colors, cracked glaze and children who look like miniature wide-eyed adults. In the right foreground a group of wild and domesticated animals—with the noteworthy exception of the unredeemable snake—sit amicably together. They have human eyes and rather bemused expressions, like they’re not sure what’s come over them, why they’re not chasing and/or fleeing one another or those wide-eyed children. In the left background, William Penn signs a treaty with the Delaware Indians, an act that paved the way for the religiously tolerant state of Pennsylvania, where the descendants of Dutch settlers opened a chain of restaurants where I earned a free grilled cheese, my mother’s favor and my sister’s ire by memorizing a poem on the menu. Where we sat in slippery vinyl booths, and I snarled at Molly when she tried to kick me under the table. Where my mother rubbed her shoulders and pulled her sunglasses out of the dark mane of her hair while my sisters and I picked out brightly colored candy sticks at the register. Where, fed, we walked into the gleaming daze of the hot parking lot, got in the station wagon, fastened our seatbelts. Meanwhile, in Connecticut, bees vibrated under stone steps. Pallid smoke curled over my grandfather’s tongue, over his teeth, and floated into a rectangle of watery sunlight.
The Dark

A thing in the dark is itself and not itself. Voices come alive in the dark. They come apart from faces and float, like the dark is a lake. Disconnected from the sound-making shapes of mouths and eyebrows and cheeks, cadence and pitch and breath grow more distinct, less familiar. The dark makes you listen. I liked it when my parents had company and I could fall asleep to the clink of glasses, volleys of laughter. Late night quiet unsettled me. I remember waking from nightmares as a kid, prickly with adrenaline, trying to summon the courage to walk across the hall to my parents’ bedroom. My mother often read into the early hours of the morning, but sometimes both my parents lay still under the bedspread. It troubled me to see them asleep. They didn’t know me then; it was like I didn’t exist. It made me want to check the nightstands for dust, peek out the windows to see if they’d grown over with vines. The dark changed how time felt. My parents could have been asleep for centuries. I could be the only one awake in the world.

Jane slept over the night of my father’s fortieth birthday party. I was ten and a half. It was a surprise party; my mother had invited all their friends and cooked beef Bourguignon, and buttery egg noodles.

From downstairs came the sounds of the world happening without us. The strip of light under my bedroom door darkened when a guest stumbled to the bathroom.

Jane’s told me a story about a china doll a girl’s father brought home from somewhere faraway. Something was off about the doll. At night the girl heard scratching, like mice. The next morning the doll’s cheeks were rosier, and the girl felt sick and weak. Her parents didn’t believe her. But when they woke up the next day, their daughter was
dead in her bed. The china doll’s fingernails were long and sharp and her cheeks were rosier than ever.

It was strange how the story made my eyes water. I wasn’t crying. That wasn’t it. More like something inside me had to get out.

There were other stories too about maniacs, ghosts and haunted stables. Always a new and terrible way to die. I wanted to stop listening, but I didn’t want to at the same time. I needed to know all the things that could happen to a body, the ways it could be broken and breached.

Jane always wanted to look at *Playboy* in the garage or read the sex scenes from *Forever*. She’d already asked me if I knew what “Reunited” meant.

“Reunited and it feels so good,” she sang. “Do you know what that means? Reunited? Do you get it?”

Jane was my best friend. She showed up for second grade in a blue and white sailor dress like a girl from one of my books. I remember a hat and gloves, but I wouldn’t swear to it. I’m sure as soon as I saw the sailor dress I gave her a hat and gloves in my imagination. She had a British accent; her family had lived in England and Kenya and on weekends her father dressed in white trousers and sweater and played interminable games of cricket in the park. Jane’s accent meant that in the second grade hierarchy she was on a par with Skylar who wore clogs and could draw the best Snoopy in our class and Hilary who’d missed two months of school when she was cast as an orphan in a touring production of *Annie*. I wanted to be Jane’s best friend. Not second or third best or one of her best, her only best.
There was a commercial on TV back then—for what, I don’t recall—in which two boys signed a handwritten contract to be best friends forever and buried it in a coffee can in one of their backyards. The kids grew up in a brisk montage until—in a popular twist of that era—one of them took off a baseball cap and shook out her Susan Dey hair, at which point the two were shown exchanging vows in the coffee can backyard. The fact that it was a friendship-turned-romance was insignificant to me. I was fixated on the story that two kids could decide to love each other and make it stick forever. That’s what I craved with Jane. I proposed a contract; Jane didn’t think it was necessary.

I became obsessed with a movie called *Escape to Witch Mountain*. The brother and sister in the film could communicate telepathically. I was convinced if Jane and I practiced, we could develop the ability. I’d open a book and prop it between us. Thus shielded, I would draw a picture of an umbrella or a horse and ask Jane to call to mind what I was drawing. Jane bored of it quickly and wanted to make prank calls. Once I tried to send a mental message to my mother. I came home from school one afternoon when Molly had gone to a friend’s house. I’d forgotten my key. I knocked at the back door, then pounded. It was bitterly cold, the ground frozen under packed snow. Worse, I had to pee.

When my mom had a headache, she swallowed pills with Coke, pulled down the shades in her bedroom and crawled under the covers. I remember the still landscape of her body under the cream-colored bedspread, how her voice cracked like ice or leaves underfoot if we came in to ask her a question.

I didn’t think I could hold it much longer, and I started to panic. I tried to send her a message. *Open the door. Your daughter is outside. Come to the door.*
The house was silent. *OPEN THE DOOR!* I thought as loud as I could. I pounded and yelled. I shivered on our back stoop till the sun was low in the sky. When my mother finally let me in, my corduroys were frozen to my legs.

“You made me pee in my pants,” I yelled.

She blinked, bewildered. “Why would you do that? I was just taking a nap. Why didn’t you knock louder?”

The girl in *Escape to Witch Mountain* also had premonitions. I was less fascinated by that particular power. Even if you could see into the future, I figured, the most you could do was brace yourself for whatever lay ahead.
Girls Reform School

Poppie’s street was only one block long. It was called Fremont Place and it ran between Rose and High Streets like the line in the middle of a capital H. Poppie’s house was on the corner at the bottom of a hill. Next to his house going up the hill was my cousins’ house. During the week we stayed at Poppie’s every summer, my cousins and I walked down to Ron’s for paper sacks of candy. We went once to the roller rink and once to the pool at my grandfather’s club with the Indian name. Sometimes I wrote a play, and we put it on in the acorn-strewn backyard. But mostly my cousins and sisters played together while I read because I was the oldest.

The summer I was eleven I was reading *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I’d read *The Hobbit* on the suggestion of our babysitter back home and subsequently checked the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy out of the library to take to the beach. The books were heavy and satisfyingly fat in their crinkly cellophane dust covers. When we pulled into Poppie’s driveway, I was slouched in the way back of the station wagon and Frodo was surrounded by Ringwraiths on Weathertop. My mother turned off the car and she and my sisters opened their doors, letting in a rush of heat.

“I’ll be in a minute,” I said.

“Put the book away, Eleanor.”

“In a sec.” I could hear my sisters crunching acorns on the stone steps that led to the front door.

“Why are you two going in empty handed?” my mother called after them.

“I have to pee,” Molly called back.

My mother tapped on the back window. “The three of you are unpacking the car,”
she said. “And open this door before you asphyxiate.”

I opened the door. “I know,” I said. “I’m coming.” I leaned on the stone wall at the edge of Poppie’s yard read until Frodo was stabbed by the Ringwraith and Strider leapt into the fray to rescue him. Then I followed my mother and my sisters into the house.

The old fan blew pollen across the foyer. I could hear voices upstairs and water running.

My mother was sitting in the dining room. “I don’t know what my brother is thinking,” she said when I came in. “Your grandfather needs four little girls in the house like he needs a hole in his head.”

“What girls?”

“Your cousins.”

“Meredith and Jack?”

“No, Eleanor, use your head. Your other cousins. Kevin and Suzy’s girls. They’re upstairs with your sisters.” There were four bedrooms upstairs. One was Poppie’s, one my mother’s. That left two for my four cousins.

“I’ll sleep next door,” I said.

“You’re not going to stay next door,” said my mother. Several pairs of bare feet thumped down the back stairs through the kitchen. Molly appeared in the doorway trailed by two of my cousins. Their hair was tangled. They were wearing shorts over swimsuits and had painted their nails with a green magic marker.

“You sleep here, Mom,” I said. “In your regular room.”

My mother’s face started to crumple.
“Mom,” I said. “Sam can stay with you.”

“I try so hard,” my mother said. “And you just act like I’m nonsense.”

Molly put her arms around our mother’s neck and pressed her cheek to her temple. She looked at me over our mother’s head. “You’re hurting her feelings,” she stage whispered. “I treat her like she’s my real mom.”

That winter, Molly had announced that she was pretty sure she was adopted. “I’m not smart like you,” she’d said, “I don’t like reading and I don’t have headaches and both you and Mom do.”

“Mom said you have fat little legs like her.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Molly said. “I know I’m adopted.”

“Molly,” my mother moaned. “I thought we were over this.”

“Just kidding, Mom,” Molly said. “You sleep in your room and we’ll sleep next door.”

“I don’t have the energy to fight about it.” My mother started to cry in earnest.

“Poor little mom.” Molly said. “She’ll be all alone.”

My cousins looked alarmed. “We’ll be here, Aunt Margaret,” said Jenny, who was six.

“We’re moving to a new house,” said Deidre, who was five and nearly identical to her sister.

Jenny piped in, “Dad and Mom are moving our things so we have to stay with Poppie.”
“How long are you staying?” asked my mother. My cousins shrugged. Deirdre scratched at a bug bite on her arm. “Well how long have you been here?” my mother said. Jenny turned toward the kitchen. “Siobhan!” she yelled. My mother grimaced.

“What?” Siobhan shouted down from upstairs.

“Girls!” My mother said. “Do we have to yell? Can we all please try to act civilized?” My cousin Siobhan came downstairs with the baby on her hip and kissed my mother on the cheek. Siobhan was four years younger than me but she’d always acted like a grownup. Trish, the baby, was really more of a toddler. It looked like Siobhan was struggling to hold her but when she tried to set her down, Trish let out a wail and reached to be picked up again.

“Hello, Aunt Margaret.” Siobhan sat down at the table with Trish on her lap. Trish buried her face in Siobhan’s t-shirt.

“How long have you girls been staying here?” my mother repeated.

“Just a week,” said Siobhan. “We’re moving to a different town in Connecticut. My father’s going to work at a reform school, and it comes with a free house.”

“A reform school?”

“I think that’s what it’s called. It’s for girls who have problems.”

“Orphans?” Molly said.

“Not orphans,” said Siobhan.

“Maybe orphans,” said Molly.
“It sounds like juvenile delinquents,” my mother said. “And you girls are going to live there?”

“We have our own house,” said Siobhan. “Next to the school. There’s a stream.”

“And you’re staying here until then. With Poppie. Poppie’s taking care of you.”

“I know how to make spaghetti,” said Siobhan. “And scrambled eggs. Poppie loves my scrambled eggs.”

“They must be special,” said my mother. “Poppie can be very picky about his eggs. Is anyone next door?”

“Meredith’s at her friend’s house and Jack’s in trouble,” Jenny said.

“Where are the grownups? Where are my brother and sister-in-law? Where is Poppie?” my mother asked.

“Why is Jack in trouble?” asked Molly.

“He was jumping over us on his dirt bike,” said Deidre.

“We lay down on the sidewalk,” said Jenny.

“Aunt Julia is probably next door,” said Siobhan. “She’s the one who caught Jack jumping over them.”

My mother turned to me. “You and your sisters can unpack the car and bring your things inside.”

“I like that shirt,” Siobhan was saying to Molly as I left the room. Molly was wearing a butter yellow alligator polo we’d gotten in a hand-me-down box from friends of our family who went to a country club. Molly had been begging
for some, but our mother said they were too expensive. She’d bought Molly two shirts from J.C. Penney for her birthday and Molly had burst into tears and refused to wear them because they had foxes on them instead of alligators.

I trotted the length of the front porch and down the stone steps to the driveway. I wasn’t sleeping at Poppie’s house. And if we didn’t sleep there this summer, how could she make us sleep there again? She couldn’t do it; it wouldn’t make any sense. I collected her things from the station wagon: her enormous, cadet blue suitcase with the latch, her canvas bag of books, her monogrammed train case from college in which she packed her shampoo, toothpaste, makeup and cream, her flowered bag of sneakers, sandals and pumps. I whispered to myself the song Bilbo sings when he leaves for Rivendell: *Now far ahead the Road has gone/ and I must follow if I can.* And then, to see if I could scare myself: *One Ring to Rule them all, one ring to bind them, one ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.* It raised the hairs on the back of my neck, even in the sun with the katydids abuzz. I put everything in the room where my mother always stayed, her old bedroom in the front of the house, adjacent to Poppie’s. I stole a stick of gum out of her purse and peeked into the other bedrooms before I went back down. Clothes, towels and swimsuits hung over bed frames and on doorknobs. Coloring books lay open on the floor. There was an empty bag of potato chips half hidden under the bed. Next to the bed “I love you” was written in green crayon on the chalky plaster wall.

My mother was on the phone in the kitchen. I listened from the top of the back stairs. “I’m just saying a heads up would have been nice,” she said. She was
talking to my uncle. Then yelling. Then quiet. I wanted her to ask him about the reform school. What would it be like? Would there be murderers? Girls who lit things on fire?

My sisters and cousins had turned on the TV in the den. I slipped down the front stairs and back outside. I wrenched my own suitcase from the back of the car and lugged it up the sidewalk to my cousins’ house next door. The street was hot and quiet. Insects buzzed and clicked, up the block a screen door slammed. Upstairs in my cousins’ house, all the bedroom doors were closed. I opened the door to the attic, set my suitcase on the stairs and headed back to Poppie’s. My mother would protest, I was sure. She would cry, probably. It didn’t matter.

“Where did you put your things?” she asked when I found her. She was in Poppie’s closet, going through his shirts. There was an old-fashioned composition notebook on his bed. I sat down and flipped through the pages. It was filled with faded cursive.

“Be careful with that, please,” said my mother. “That notebook is very special.”

“What is it?”

“It’s my novel. Where are your things?”

“You wrote a novel?”

“I started one. Eleanor. I asked you a question.”

“I put them next door.”

“Why did you do that?”

“How old were you when you wrote it?”
“I don’t know, Eleanor, your age about. This is where we stay. Not my brother’s house. This is my home. Why shouldn’t I stay in my own bed?” Her voice was starting to quaver.

“Mom, it’s not a big deal. There’s no room here.”

“There is in here.” She nodded to the bed next to Poppie’s.

“He smokes, Mom. And he snores. It’s disgusting.”

“You haven’t even asked your aunt and uncle. Not that anybody bothered to be here to greet us. Everybody just does whatever the hell they want to, excuse my French. None of you give a damn about me. Your Uncle Kevin is all over kingdom come doing Lord only knows what and he saddles your grandfather with four little girls.” She sat on the floor and started to cry. “You’re going to make me stay all alone.”

“Can I read your novel, Mom?”

“Not now.”

“Maybe later?”

“We’ll see.”

*   *   *

I found Aunt Julia and told her my mom said it was okay if we slept over since the reform school cousins were staying at Poppies. I took Jack’s room and Molly and Jack slept up in the attic, which had a bedroom and a storeroom and a bathroom with a clawfoot tub. Poppie had an attic too but nobody slept up there. And he had a clawfoot tub and a clawfoot table in the living room.
“Why did people put claws on their furniture in the olden days?” I asked my mother.

“I don’t know,” she said. She was still mad at me for not sleeping at Poppie’s. When she was mad she never answered my questions.

“It makes it seem like everything’s alive,” I said.

“Don’t say things like that,” she said.

“Like everything—even if it doesn’t seem alive, even bathtubs and chairs—is thinking things like what they can eat and how they can hide and who might be hunting for them.”

“What makes you say things like that?” my mother said. “That’s some imagination you have. Why don’t you try thinking about pleasant things?”

All week I slept in Jack's messy room on Star Wars sheets. If I sat up halfway on one elbow I could see out his window Poppie’s white house. It looked like a shadowy ghost in the hot dark, the house where my cousins were lying in bed. My mother lay in the same bed she had as a child; she kept her light on till morning. Then she slept as late as she could when everyone else was up and gone. Once, at a big family reunion, my parents had gone to sleep in Stevey and Julia’s attic, and a bat had chased them out. My mother didn’t belong there, she belonged next door in her own bed.

* * *

The afternoon before we left for the beach, I padded through my grandfather’s foyer on the way to get a drink from the kitchen. My grandfather called me into his den where he was watching a baseball game on TV. I stood with the arm of the couch
between us. It was fat and threadbare, a brown fabric like pipe cleaners. There was a 
wriggly vein in Poppie’s temple. He looked like Gollum.

“Ellie, old gal.”

“Poppie, old boy.”

“You’re awfully fresh. You’re getting pretty big, aren’t you?”

“I guess.”

“Come here.”

“Do you want me to get you a sandwich?”

“Maybe in a minute.” While we were talking, he gripped my thigh with his 
knobby fingers and squeezed.

“Ow,” I said.

“Ow?” He laughed and shook my leg like shaking a tree for apples. “Did you say 
ow?” He slid his hand up the leg of my shorts, pressed up between my legs with his 
fingers, with the blade of his hand, moving it around in my shorts. “I’ll show you ow.”

Something happened on the TV. Somebody hit the ball. He pulled his hand away and 
swatted my butt.

“Go get old Poppie a beer.”

I pulled the tab in the kitchen and dropped it into the can. You weren’t supposed 
to do that anymore. I’d heard of kids swallowing tabs from cans of Coke. Siobhan had 
sliced her foot open on one at the beach and had to be taken to the hospital for stitches. I 
brought Poppie his beer and watched him take a sip. Then I went next door.

Aunt Julia was icing a cake for Jack’s birthday. Boiled white icing studded with 
M&M’s. At dinner we ate hamburgers, corn on the cob and sweet, salty tomatoes. The
sky outside the windows glowed. Poppie sat at the head of the table. Trish sat on Siobhan’s lap all through dinner. Their parents were still moving into their new house at the reform school.

“Trish, honey, why don’t you give your big sister a break?” Aunt Julia said. Trish buried her face in Siobhan’s t-shirt. At dinner Jack showed us a trick he’d learned from a kid up the street. You could swipe your finger through a candle flame and if you did it quick, it didn’t hurt. The grownups were talking about the president and the pope. We kneeled on our chairs and sliced the flame with our forefingers until we spilled wax on the tablecloth and they yelled at us to stop.

I read in Jack’s narrow bed until the house was quiet. I’d finished The Fellowship of the Ring and was on to The Two Towers. The orcs and, even worse, the Ringwraiths, gave me nightmares, but I wouldn’t tell my mother or she might take the books away. When Gandalf had been lost in Moria, I’d had to switch to the Bobbsey Twins for an afternoon before I could return to Middle Earth. Nightmares notwithstanding, I was filled with a terrible longing to live in the world of the books, to be a different girl, maybe not even a girl at all. I remembered things from books, places and people and they didn’t feel qualitatively different than things that had happened in real life. After I turned out the light, I lay on my back and let tears slide from the corners of my eyes. No matter how much I wished there could be other worlds, there was never going to be any such thing. The sadness of it unmoored me. I floated like a ghost, the way I floated sometimes in Poppie’s room when I sailed like a sly little boat up to a corner of the ceiling and from that out-of-reach vantage point watched things happen to the other me so hapless and human below.
We spent two weeks on the Vineyard with Aunt Julia and the next-door cousins. The reform school cousins stayed in Connecticut with Poppie until their parents picked them up and then Poppie joined us, along with Uncle Stevey and my father. The house we rented was expensive. My father and Stevey split it between them. I finished *The Lord of the Rings* and started it again from the beginning. We asked my mother about the school our cousins were moving to.

“It’s like an orphanage,” Molly said.

“It’s not like an orphanage,” said my mother. “There’s no such thing as orphanages like in the books you read.”

“A boarding school,” I said.

“Sort of.”

“Why can’t I go to a boarding school?”

“You wouldn’t like this one. It’s for troubled children. Or teenagers. I don’t know exactly. You don’t need boarding school. You have a loving family.”

“They are orphans,” said Molly.

My father ground coffee in the morning and grilled fish at night and went for runs with Uncle Stevey during the day. My mother and Aunt Julia strolled the beach looking for James Taylor and Carly Simon. My grandfather sat in a chair and read books and swam freestyle—he called it the crawl—back and forth along the shore. The night the fathers arrived, the cousins moved into one room, some in bunkbeds, some in sleeping bags on the floor.
“Wouldn’t someone be more comfortable in Poppie’s room than packed in here like sardines?” my mother said. “He has twin beds in there.” No one answered her.

* * *

On the day we left the island, I couldn’t decide what to wear. We were going to meet the juvenile delinquents. Uncle Kevin had convinced my mother to stop overnight on our way home. I braided my hair. My mother was terrible at making braids, the most she could do was an Alice-in-Wonderland ribbon and she never ironed them. I hated wrinkled ribbons. I put on my pink pedal pushers and striped t-shirt. We got off the highway and drove down sun-dappled roads, through the green light of trees that arced overhead. We went over a covered bridge that rattled and clacked under our tires, then up a gravel drive to a square wheat-colored brick building thickly surrounded by trees. Beyond it was a three-story building, of the same brick. There was a basketball court between them. My Uncle Kevin came out the door of the little house and down the three cement steps.

“Good, you found us.”

“That we did,” my mother said. “Where are your charges?”

He waved his hand in the direction of the big building. “They’re around. You’ll meet some of them. It’s movie night tonight.”

The girls in the reform school were teenagers. Our cousins told us. My cousins reminded the reform school girls of their little sisters who were in foster care or back at the homes they’d run away from. They wanted to brush my cousins’ hair and teach them
to shoot baskets. They taught our cousins a game called M.A.S.H, which stood for Mansion Apartment Shack House. It told your fortune—who you would marry, where you would live and how many children you would have. Instead of wood, the floors of my cousins’ house were linoleum, dark red with flecks. My cousins’ beds were made of mattresses on orange crates and they shared a big dresser painted purple and covered with stickers. We put on swimsuits and went out to the creek. We had to keep our sneakers on because of rocks. The water was icy and clean. There were shallow places and deeper ones where you could sit on a rock and feel the water push against you on its way down the hill. If I’d been by myself I could have pretended it was somewhere wild, somewhere in a book, a magical forest, a stream with truth telling waters. I turned away from the others and tried to imagine it.

“It feels wonderful, doesn’t it?” Uncle Kevin said over my shoulder. We came out here last week and took off our bathing suits. It’s like Eden.”

We had dinner on paper plates at two tables pushed together in the living room and covered with patterned cloths. We ate early because it was movie night. My mother was worried about us watching a movie with delinquents.

“Come on, Margaret,” my Aunt Suzy said. “It’s perfectly fine. They’re just kids.”

“Maybe it will be good for them to see what real life is like,” my mother conceded. “They certainly don’t appreciate what they have.” She tilted her head toward me. “This one won’t stop bugging me for her own room. I shared with my sister. Your cousins share, did you see that? I just love your room, girls. It’s so cozy and sweet.”

“Trust me,” said Uncle Kevin. “Movie night is great. Sometimes it’s fun. Sometimes it gives them something to think about. I’m determined we can really make a
difference for these girls. Not everyone’s as lucky as you kids. These are kids no one else wants. Some of them are retarded. Some are just rebellious. Regular teen stuff. We don’t have any violent criminals. Petty stuff, shoplifting. There may have been a murder case, I don’t know, a few years ago. Nothing like that now. And that was boys.”

Aunt Suzy pushed her chair back from the table. “Clear your plates, girls. We have ice cream. It’s nothing fancy, just from the grocery store. Vanilla ice cream and jimmies.” We ate them outside. A dirty white cat watched us from the outskirts of the lot.

“That’s Snowball,” said Jenny. “We’re trying to tame him.”

Movie night was in a big room like a cafeteria with a stone fireplace at one end and fake wood paneling on the walls. There was a screen set up on a tripod in front of the fireplace and a film projector in the aisle between rows of plastic chairs. We sat in the front row and watched the girls file in. They wore gray sweatshirts with the school crest in navy. They were big girls, teenagers mostly, though Uncle Kevin said they had some twelve year olds there. Maybe forty girls in all. “Never as many girls as boys,” he’d said. “Girls don’t get into as much trouble. Girls can be very resourceful. Sneaky, too. They know how to get along.”

The grownups didn’t even stay for the movie. They let the all girls fill lunch bags of popcorn from a big plastic bowl, then they started the movie and left. All around us the crinkle of paper bags punctuated the cacophony of conversations.

“I know how, too,” the girl behind me was saying. “You don’t need pills. You can kill yourself with apple seeds.”

“Shut up,” said her companion.

“I’m serious. They have cyanide in them. We learned it in bio.”
“You have to eat a lot of apples though.”

I swiveled in my chair. “Why would you want to kill yourself?”

The girl nudged Siobhan’s chair with her foot. “These your cousins?” she said.

“Yeah,” said Siobhan.

“They’re visiting us,” said Jenny.

The movie started. It was called *The Cross and the Switchblade*, and it was about gang members who became Christians because of this priest. The gang leader was Erik Estrada. Some of the girls whistled when he came on the screen.

The girl behind me kicked my chair. I shifted in my seat. The second time she did it, I turned around.

“Sorry,” she said. I turned to face forward. The girl laughed and whispered something to her friend. When the first part of the movie finished, someone turned on the lights so they could put the next reel on the projector.

The girl behind me leaned over my shoulder. “How come your cousin got curly hair and yours is so straight?”

“I don’t know.”

The girl had brown hair, in an uneven shaggy cut. “I’m growing mine,” she said.

“You know how to French braid?”

“No,” I said. The lights went out and the second half of the film flickered to life on screen.

“Don’t worry about your cousins,” the girl said. “We look out for them.”

The little house looked old-fashioned in the night. Aunt Suzy was moving around in the kitchen. Yellow light spilled onto the stoop. When I stood in the yard and looked
up I could see stars inside the ring of trees, which made it seem like a holy place.

Snowball the cat was out hunting, probably, looking for things that scuttled in the leaves.

I shared a bed with my sisters, which I hated. I didn’t like anything touching me or
breathing on me at night.

   We were allowed to wear shorts to church the next morning because we were
driving home right after and it was an eight-hour trip. I’d never been to church in shorts
before. The congregation rumbled *And also with you...we lift them up to the Lord...It is
right to give Him thanks and praise.* I watched the backs of people’s heads. I watched
them pray and sing. I watched them adjust their clothes, rub their noses while Jesus
looked down from the cross and the priest told us how to go to Heaven. It was impossible
to tell what people really believed. Impossible to know who was good or bad by looking.
My mother sang high and loud like always. Uncle Kevin’s voice was lower, like faraway
thunder. They were sister and brother. They’d known each other when they were small.
My sisters and cousins fidgeted in the pew. Trish clung sweatily to Siobhan, even with
their mother right beside them.

   After Mass we blinked and hugged in the parking lot.

   Uncle Kevin said, “It was wonderful to have you here,” and gave my mother a
kiss and held her elbow and closed her door and then we drove away.

   I sat in the way back. I’d almost finished *The Return of the King* for the second
time. I didn’t want to be done, but I couldn’t slow down. The highway blazed. Sun beat
on the pages as I read. It went exactly the same as before. The foe was faced, the battle
won, the new and just king crowned. Frodo and Bilbo sailed from Middle-earth with
Gandalf and the elves. It felt unbearable. It felt impossible to take. My mother drove fast
and sang along to fifties songs on the radio. It would be hours before we were home. I
took an apple from the cooler between the seats and ate it methodically down to the core,
every last bite, even the seeds.
Ordinary People

The summer before seventh grade we moved to a suburb of coiffed lawns and gleaming Mercedes. I had dreamed of an attic bedroom in a rambling old house with a mysterious history and maybe a wardrobe that led to a parallel world like Narnia or Neverland. My mother said our new house was called a split-level ranch. It didn’t seem remotely magical or likely to possess secret passageways, but I did finally get my own room. All three of us had one, Molly, Sam and I. Mine was full of books and stuffed animals, Molly’s full of baby dolls. Sam got a little container of holy water and kept it near her bedroom door so she could bless herself whenever she entered.

Having failed to convince my mother to send me to boarding school, I started seventh grade at Queen of Angels, the K-8 parochial school at our parish church. I got detention my first week because I didn’t know we were supposed to stand when the monsignor entered the classroom. Seventh grade is when I found out I was a loser. That September we carpooled with the Dettmers, who were also newcomers to Queen of Angels. Imogene was their oldest, then Janet, then a bunch more sticky-mouthed, knotty-haired siblings. The Dettmers picked us up in a dented maroon station wagon with peanut butter and jelly on the door handles. It smelled like bologna and dirty hair. I felt vaguely ashamed when other kids saw us getting dropped off with them, but I hadn’t put my finger on exactly what the problem was. Molly was more savvy.

“They’re losers,” she announced at dinner.
“Why would you say something like that?” My mother put down her fork. “That’s not nice. Imogene’s a beautiful name. Does she pronounce it IM-oh-jen or IM-oh-jean? It’s Gaelic, you know.”

Molly washed her bite of cube steak and creamed corn down with a gulp of milk. “Their car’s dirty and they’re weirdos. You shouldn’t make us carpool with them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my mother said. “Their mother plays in the folk choir. Wouldn’t you like to get involved in something like that?”

“The folk choir’s retarded. Can I have a brownie?”

“Quite frankly that language does not make me think you deserve a brownie. I don’t hear your sister complaining,” my mother said.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Molly pressed on. “It doesn’t matter to her, Mom. She’s already a loser, too.”

“I am not a loser,” I protested.

“It’s not your fault,” my sister said matter-of-factly. “You can’t help it, but sorry to say you are.” She lay down her fork and looked at my mother. “You said if I finished I could have a brownie.”

School was bewildering. There were so many spoken and unspoken rules. There were uniforms and bras instead of corduroys and undershirts. Everyone played sports, which terrified me. Socially, I was an outcast. I talked about the wrong things. I smuggled books out to recess. I didn’t wear eyeliner. You’re so smart everyone said. It’s disgusting. I hate you. I wasn’t asked to people’s houses on the weekends. I stood on the edges of conversations about boys and TV shows and tried to laugh in the right spots, braced all the time for the backhanded compliment or the private joke I wouldn’t get.
My favorite class was English. In the first week of school, Miss O’Rourke called us to the front of the room to diagram sentences on the blackboard. I was a natural at diagramming: fast and accurate. I knew enough to hide how much I loved it from my classmates who groaned when Miss O’Rourke held up the chalk and started calling out names. It was so satisfying: the way the words fit together into phrases and clauses and sentences. It felt like building with Legos or Tinker Toys when I was a kid. The way every word had a name and a function. Miss O’Rourke also assigned book reports. “I want you to get creative,” she said. “Make a skit or do a commercial—we’re moving past dioramas, people!” We were allowed to read any book of our choosing. I wanted to read my mother’s books. I wanted to crack the code of the grownup world. I was about to be a teenager. I needed to understand how it worked, how I was supposed to act, what I was supposed to be. My mother had read *Ordinary People* for book club. I took it off her shelf without asking, because I thought she might say no if I did. The movie had just come out, and it was rated R. I read and loved the book. It had a teenaged protagonist who cut his wrists because he felt responsible for his brother’s death in a sailing accident. The doctor told the parents the kid was serious about it because he cut vertically instead of horizontally. The parents wound up getting divorced, because the mother was so angry about her kid getting blood in the grout of the bathroom tiles. She wanted everything to be perfect, their lives to be perfect and she was furious at her kid for messing that up. In the end, the kid sees a therapist and so does the dad and everything’s going to be okay. The kid also gets a girlfriend, and they have sex.

For my book report, I decided I’d do a puppet show for the class. I’d stage a scene between the boy and his psychiatrist, Dr. Berger, and one between the mother and father.
arguing about their son. Somewhere I’d come across a hobby magazine with instructions on how to make apple-head dolls. These were folksy, homespun dolls made from carved and dehydrated apples. I decided they were just the thing for my puppet show. I carved four apples with a kitchen knife and gathered four sticks from the yard. I jabbed each apple-head onto a stick and stood them up to dry on my desk. They filled my bedroom with a sweetish, rotten scent in the days before my show. They weren’t quite done when the day finally arrived. I typed up a script. I glued clothes around the sticks, leaving an opening at the bottom so I could work them like hand puppets. I painted on faces. I hadn’t quite thought through the fact that the apples shrivel up into little old faces. It looked good for the psychiatrist who I’d imagined as kindly and older but the parents were supposed to be good looking and young and of course, the teenage boy was too. In the movie he was played by Timothy Hutton.

Overall, I was happy with my performance and thought it was one of the best in the class. A few of the popular girls had read *The Outsiders* and made up a skit. They changed in the bathroom into jeans and white t-shirts with the sleeves rolled up. No one else did a puppet show. I waited for the compliments to roll in.

I was surprised when Gillian Dempsey pulled me aside at recess and took me under the pine trees where people went to have private conversations. She had a sandwich baggie of goldfish. She always had a snack at recess, pretzel sticks or chex mix or goldfish. She extended the bag to me. She wore a Claddagh ring and blue eyeliner. I took a few and looked at her. Her bangs were perfect.

“Thanks,” I said.
“That was an interesting book report,” she said. “Do you wanna go watch the guys on the field?”

“Sure,” I said. I closed my fist around the goldfish she’d given me. On the other side of the stand of trees was a hill that ran down to the softball fields. Gillian sat at the top of the hill.

“No one will bother us here,” she said. I sat next to her. “I thought your book report was really interesting,” she said. “But some people might not understand it. They might think it was weird that you did a puppet show about suicide.”

“I didn’t do a puppet show about suicide,” I said. “It was about a family.”

“And a kid who goes to a psychiatrist for trying to kill himself.”

“What did you like about it?”

“I thought it was interesting. Your puppets were really unusual.”

“They were made out of apples,” I said.

“The only thing is that people were just like kind of freaked out. Or they might have been. Because it was kind of intense.”

“Uh huh.”

“You know you have really pretty eyes.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“And your hair is pretty. Have you thought about styling it like with wings? Or feathers? There’s a good haircutting place at Whitehaven Mall.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“I know people would really like you and want to be your friend if— The thing is, sometimes you say weird things. Or you do weird things. Like your book report.”
“My book report was weird?”

“I mean, like I said, I thought it was really interesting. But people just aren’t expecting that really. Or some of the things you say, like some of the things you talk about.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, wizards or asking a lot of questions.” She paused. I still hadn’t eaten any of the goldfish. “You would look really pretty with eyeliner,” Gillian said. “Do you want to try some?”

“Okay.”

Gillian took an eyeliner pencil out of a small zipped case and knelt above me. “Ow, these needles,” she said, brushing her knees. “I’m like, getting stabbed to death.” She laughed. “Okay, look up. Hold still. Don’t be scared.” I obeyed. Gillian’s hands were warm on my face. She smelled like goldfish. Above us snips of sky were pinned between the branches. The air felt muffled under the trees. Like the world was far away. Like we could be anywhere, anytime. If we didn’t look to the right and see the blacktop and the low red brick school building. If we didn’t look to the left and see the field, the boys racing around in their navy pants and white shirts, sweaters left in heaps on the grass. We could be somewhere hushed and magic.

“This feels like a sacred grove,” I said.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” said Gillian. “Don’t say stuff like that.” She sat on her heels and surveyed her work. “It looks good.” She replaced the eyeliner pencil and handed me a lipgloss. “Here. This has sparkles in it.” I rolled it on. It was sticky and tasted like strawberry. “Here’s what we can do,” she said. “We’ll make a sign. Like if
you start saying something or doing something weird in the cafeteria or at recess or whatever, I’ll give you a look and just like twist my earring like this. And then you’ll know just stop. Will that help?”

“Thanks,” I said. “That will probably help.” The bell rang. We stood and brushed off our skirts and walked back up to school.

“This is our secret,” she said as we left the shelter of the pines. “I’m not going to tell anyone what we talked about.”

My gratitude for Gillian’s benevolence was shot through with a feeling I didn’t recognize at the time as anger over what felt like an unfair choice: I could win acceptance—perhaps, and grudging—by burying parts of myself or I could resign myself to being alone. I felt shame, too. I couldn’t fathom what it was about me that wasn’t okay, that meant I didn’t belong. But I didn’t want to be a weirdo. And you couldn’t decide if you were a weirdo or not. Other people decided it for you. I wondered about the boy’s suicide in *Ordinary People*. Now I knew, vertical not horizontal. Not that I needed to know. But I was pleased to have the information.

Gillian was trying out for cheerleading. “You should do it,” she urged. “You can do the splits better than me.” That was true. I could almost do the splits. If you didn’t look too closely, you would absolutely think I was doing them. I could do them from a cartwheel or land in them after jumping in the air. I didn’t excel at jumping in general; I was largely unsuccessful both at achieving much height and at executing the mid-air herkies, pikes and splits that were part of the cheer vocabulary. I was good at that Presidential Fitness flexed arm-hanging test where you had to hold your chin above a bar because I was gritty and I didn’t let go of things easily. My mother said I held grudges.
Anything that pitted grim determination against gravity, I was prepared to kick ass.

Jumping, however, outwitted me. I was very sad in seventh grade. Maybe being sad makes it hard to get off the ground.

I wanted to be happy. And there was something about cheerleaders that made it seem that they might know how. It wasn’t just that they got attention from boys—or guys as they were suddenly called, as in, *do you like any guys in our class, because I think Matt Hendricks totally likes you.* By the way, this new development, among others—like needing to wear shorts under your skirt so no one would see your underwear by accident—was honestly a little bewildering to me. I didn’t really like boys—guys—yet. But the something about cheerleaders was more than that iconic allure. Certain people seemed less permeable than others—safer somehow. And cheerleaders—with their bright colors and staccato claps and their *Ready, okay!*—seemed to be truly okay and ready for whatever life intended to throw their way. I envied them. Happiness was a mystery I didn’t know how to unlock. It seemed to have something to do with being pretty—shiny hair, clear skin, lean thighs and *Playboy* breasts. Happiness was getting good grades but not caring too much about school. Having people want to be your friend. Happiness was being cool, sneaking into R rated movies at the mall and making out at parties and stealing drinks from your parents’ liquor cabinet. Happiness was having the right clothes and the right family. It was wanting the right things. It was not being a weirdo or a loser. I couldn’t get the hang of it.

Popular girls at our school either A: Were good at sports, B: Had shiny feathered hair and glossy lips like Valerie Bertinelli, or C: All of the above. They shaved their legs, wore bras and knew how to toss their hair when they talked to or about boys. After dinner
I stood in our peach tiled bathtub and washed my hair. When I got out I wrapped one towel around my body and one around my head like a turban—two fresh towels even though my mother got mad at us for throwing too many down the laundry chute. I got out the blow dryer and a round bristled brush and looped my wet hair around it in chunks, in hopes of achieving a Breck girl effect. With the front piece tangled around the brush, my forelock, I thought, like a wild pony, like Misty of Chincoteague, I blasted it with hot air till my face stung. But when I tugged on the handle to unwind the curl, the bristles twisted in tighter. I stepped outside the bathroom, the brush’s plastic handle knocking against my cheek.

“Mom!” I called.

“Don’t yell,” my mother called back from my parents’ bedroom. “What is it?”

Molly opened her bedroom door and looked at me. I ignored her and walked into my parents’ room. My father was lying on the bed with his eyes closed. My mother was propped up in bed reading. “Your father is trying to go to sleep,” she said. “But it’s a little hard with all the yelling.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I need help. My hair’s stuck.”

Molly had followed me into their room. “See?” She looked at my mother, then back at me. Shrugged her shoulders. “Loser.” She padded back down the hall and closed her door.

I tried not to cry when my mother cut the brush out with her sewing scissors. We made the chopped off piece into some bangs that swept to the side. The girls at school said they loved it. I decided to try out for cheerleading.
My almost splits actually did get me on the squad. Well, almost. New cheerleaders were provisional. We went to practice and learned the moves, but we had a season to prove ourselves before we could graduate to wearing the uniform and cheering at actual games. The first couple days of practice we learned the basics—the ready, okay position, high V, low V, broken T and touch down. And our first few cheers:


And:

*R-O-W-D-I-E—that’s the way we spell rowdy! Rowdy! Let’s get rowdy!*

R-O-W-D-I-E. Therein lay my cheerleading downfall. At the end of that practice I approached Dawn McManus who was the deputy in charge of provisional cheerleaders. She looked intimidatingly cool in her short navy shorts with white piping and her perfectly white Keds and scrunchy socks. I’d heard she was dating a ninth grader. She was writing something on a clipboard.

“Hi,” I said.

“Uh huh?” said Dawn. She glanced at me then back down at whatever she was writing.

“So I have a question about that one cheer,” I began. “The rowdy one. R-O-W—”

“Yeah, got it,” she said. She crouched and tucked the clipboard into a duffle bag.

“Well, um, you know that’s not how you spell rowdy, right?”

Dawn was rummaging in her bag. “What?” She pulled out a pack of Chicklets.

“R-O-W-D-I-E is not the way you spell rowdy.” Dawn put a Chicklet in her mouth. She didn’t offer me one. “It’s spelled with a Y,” I faltered.
“No duh,” Dawn said, “But does Y rhyme with EEE?” She tossed the Chicklets back into the bag.

I soldiered on. “No, I know, totally duh, it doesn’t. But—”

Dawn bent and retrieved the clipboard. “What’s your name, again?” she asked.

I told her.

She scanned the top sheet and marked something with her pen. “Well,” she said, “It says that’s the way we spell rowdy. We can spell rowdy however we want.” She picked up her duffle bag and turned to go up to the parking lot.

I was stunned. It bothered me that rowdy was misspelled in the cheer, but I could at least kind of accept that as poetic license. But to follow up a blatantly misspelled word by shouting “That’s the way we spell rowdy?” Are you kidding me? Why not just make up a cheer that said,

We’re stupid as hell, we don’t know how to spell!  
We’re stupid, we’re dumb, we hope we win the game!

I hurried after Dawn. This wasn’t going as well as I’d hoped. “But that kind of makes it seem like we don’t know how to spell,” I reasoned. “I mean you not only spell rowdy wrong, but then you say that’s how you spell it. Why couldn’t we just write some cheers that don’t spell words wrong? I could totally write some for you. We could say something that rhymes with Y. Die, fly, try, sky, by, sigh, lie—oh, like you could say ‘break that tie’ if there was a tie or ‘hey, hey, goodbye,’ like you guys are losers to the other team.” I trailed off. We were at the curb where people waited for their moms to pick them up. Dawn was looking at me with something like disbelief. Or pity. Her mom
pulled up in a tan station wagon. “Anyway, thanks,” I said. “That was a really good practice.”

The next day when I showed up after school a different deputy, Lauren Stevens, told me there had been a mistake and that I wasn’t actually on the team, not even as a provisional. I was on a waiting list, and if there was an injury or something they’d let me know, but there was no need for me to come to practice anymore.

“I heard what happened,” Gillian said the next day at recess. She had a baggie of carrots and celery sticks in lieu of goldfish. “Why would you do that?”

I shrugged.

“Well—” she shook her baggie of sticks. “At least you don’t have to diet like a maniac to fit into that skirt. Denise McManus is such a twig. It’s so unfair.”

Gillian was the first to sign my yearbook that June. I was surprised when the other girls followed suit. Monica Hazlett scrawled Keep in touch! in the margin next to her photo, beside which she’d penned the word Gross! with an arrow pointing to her face. Girls who had deigned to speak to me only when they wanted to copy my homework wrote Keep in touch! with their phone number below or in some cases, like Monica, U R 2 Cute 2 B 4gotten! I was bewildered. Why did they want to keep in touch? Was I really 2 cute 2 B 4gotten? Had we secretly been friends all along?